This End Will Serve

by

Sharon Himmanen

FOREVER KNIGHT

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Editorial...

It was Easter and I was watching *Star Wars.*

Actually, I was listening to *Star Wars* as I curled up in bed with the laptop I'd just gotten on permanent loan from my boss. It was cold and windy outside and I'd just spent the day writing a silly *Forever Knight* story about Nick getting hit with a pile of bricks and ending up in the ER You see, *Star Wars* has a strange effect on me, and I'm not sure I like it. The first *Forever Knight* piece I ever started and finished was written while this movie was on. As were several others. It's to the point now where I can't hear the opening strains of the theme without feeling the reflexive urge to commit fanfic.

That night the movie wasn't quite over and I was still feeling some of the creative energy that this movie mysteriously sparks in me and I started the story you're about to read. At the time I knew nothing about it--I simply wrote whatever came to mind. That was about five pages or so. On a whim I sent it to Jamie Melody Randell who sent me back an email note an hour or so later that contained one word: MORE!

It became a sort of game after that. Every night I'd write a section of the story. Every night I'd send it to Jamie. Every night I'd get that same one word reply. MORE!

Well, MORE became something of an obsession and several other beta-readers along the way. This story took over my life for about six weeks. No matter how tired I was, no matter what I was doing, no matter if I had an excruciating backache, I *had* to spend an hour or two every day working on this story. There were times when I wanted to just write an ending where everybody blew up so I could be rid of it. But throughout the creation of this story I had a wonderful set of beta readers who kept me sane, offered valuable feedback and motivation, and were a most cheerful peanut gallery.

And I learned that MORE is the most powerful word in the English language. At least for me.

My thanks to Jamie Melody Randell, Susan Garrett, Kelly Gritten, Jill Kirby and Jude Wilson for their time, their comments, their good humor as I angsted over this story in a way that would have made Nick proud, and their patience. Without it I doubt I would ever have finished it. I especially owe Jill and Kelly an extra debt of gratitude for reading this not once, but twice. Extra banana pellets for you guys. And to Kelly for providing the title.

One last bit of business. This is yet another story dealing with "Last Knight," the last episode of *Forever Knight* that many of us are still trying to deal with. This was my way.

Sharon

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What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from

--T.S. Eliot

First night...

It felt so good just to be held. It felt like a dream. Nick's arms were around her, so strong and secure, and she felt so incredibly warm and safe. At peace, for perhaps the first time in as long as she could remember. She felt his soft, cool lips brush gently against her neck as she pressed against him, trembling ever so slightly.

"Yes...." she murmured softly. His kisses became bolder, one hand moving smoothly across her shoulders and down to the small of her back, the other burying itself in her hair

"Are you sure about this, Doctor?" a soft, cold voice from across the room murmured. Natalie's eyes flew open and she saw LaCroix standing near the fireplace, dressed in black as usual, his hands clasped in front of him.

Watching them.

In panic, she dropped her arms down from around Nick's neck and pushed firmly against his chest in an attempt to get his attention, to make him look. But instead Nick wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tightly against him, his face buried in her neck and shoulder. She could feel his cold breath on her flesh.

"I do not love this woman," Nick said, his voice muffled against her hair and skin.

"Then bring her over!"

Horrified, Natalie struggled to break free from Nick's now painful embrace with all her might, shoving at him with her elbows. But it was useless as Nick effortlessly spun her around and pinned her against him with one arm across her body, so tightly she almost couldn't breathe. With the other he brushed her hair back from her neck then gripped the top of her head, tilting it back to gain better access to her neck.

Helpless and desperate, she looked to LaCroix, and wanted to beg him for help. But LaCroix simply looked on, his expression dispassionate and Natalie knew there would be no aid from that quarter.

As if to emphasize her thoughts LaCroix repeated "Bring her over."

Nick lifted his head away from her, and she heard him hiss, just before his fangs pierced her throat. The pain was sharp and intense and she gasped. Tears welled up in her eyes, tears of fear and sorrow over what was happening intermingled with her tears of pain. In a matter of seconds she felt the cold seep into her bones, saw the world fade away until there was only LaCroix's face looking down on her, his expression unreadable, except for the coldness in his eyes.

With a small shriek, Natalie sat bolt upright, gasping and shuddering. "It was a dream, just a dream," she muttered over and over again, as she rocked back and forth. It was a horrible dream, but one she hadn't had in months. Why now, she wondered. What had brought the Valentine's Day dream back with such force and clarity?

Bewildered, Natalie looked around Nick's loft from her position in front of the fireplace. What on earth was she doing on the floor? And where was Nick?

"Nick?" she called out, rising unsteadily to her feet. Had she fainted? She felt so strange and...

Something hit her with such ferocity that it took her breath away. With a groan, Natalie staggered over to the couch, one arm wrapped tightly across her abdomen. Falling to her knees with a shudder, she dug her fingers into the black leather, feeling it give way and tear.

"Nick?" she screamed again. "NICK!"

Her voice rang through the loft, echoing off the ceiling and walls of the empty room

No answer.

And then whatever was inside her was screaming insistently, drowning out all other thoughts and feelings. It was painful and completely unlike anything she'd ever felt before in her life.

Over there, to her left. She could *smell* it! Before she knew what she was doing she rose and darted to the kitchen, going up and over the sofa rather than around it in her desperation. In one swift move she ripped one of the doors off of the refrigerator, vaguely hearing it clatter to the floor behind her. Hands trembling, she snatched up the half-empty green bottle that was standing in the front. The cork just *wouldn't* come out, and her fingers fumbled with it for a moment or two before she managed to pry it loose. Tilting her head back, she drank deeply, barely finishing its contents before reaching for another.

It was thick and cold, with a bitter metallic tang to it. But it eased the awful ache ruthlessly shredding her from the inside out. So she continued to gulp the liquid down

without any real thought as to what it was.

That didn't occur to her until she was well into her third bottle.

Blood. She was *chugging* blood.

The thought made her gag. She pulled the bottle away from her lips, allowed it to slip from her suddenly numb fingers to the floor. It smashed against the tile just as she moved to the sink, leaning over it. Covering her mouth tightly with one hand she instinctively willed herself not to vomit She was only beginning to process the information mentally, but her body already knew it was going to need this blood.

The nausea passed after a few moments, and she stood there over the sink breathing deeply. "Oh God, Nick," she murmured, feeling her eyes begin to burn with unshed tears. Janette's cure hadn't worked. Nick had been unable to stop. Some part of her mind dispassionately analyzed what had happened, what she had become, and she numbly accepted the information with clinical detachment. Until she moved to wipe her eyes and her hand was stained crimson. That nearly brought on a fresh wave of tears, but she willed away. There was a lot to do right now. Crying was definitely not one of them.

How long had she been...unconscious? Natalie was uncertain of the proper term, and for some reason that bothered her. But that was something better left to another time, she thought turning away from the sink and leaning against the counter, looking around the room. She had nothing but time now, she realized. And at the moment she decided to be more concerned with finding out how much she had lost.

Or more importantly, how much of a head start Nick had.

Even without the obvious evidence in front of her eyes and ears she knew. Natalie wasn't sure how she knew, but she did; he wasn't in the loft and he wasn't even close by. Nick was gone. Had she been left behind, presumed dead? Or was there another reason?

How she was going to deal with that Natalie was uncertain. And now wasn't the time, either, though she guessed she'd have to address it soon. It was a huge can of worms yet to be dealt with. Feeling the spark of fury within her over the thought that Nick might have abandoned her, Natalie fought it down for the time being.

Sinking down onto the couch, Natalie instead began carefully laying out a plan of action. First she would find out how much time had passed. Next she would take stock of the...nutrition situation. Pausing, she frowned. Maybe the food situation ought to take priority, she reasoned, an image of Richard forming unbidden in her mind. A hungry, abandoned fledgling vampire on the loose would not be a good thing.

It was settled. Food first, then she'd find out how much time had passed since she'd been unconscious. She nodded slowly in satisfaction; these were two good short term goals. There was so much more she had to do, she knew. But not at the moment. Right now she needed to keep things at a level she could handle, to ensure her survival. She could handle this.

Leaning forward she picked up the TV remote off the table, and glanced down at her watch. Thank heaven she lived in the era of twenty-four hour news channels. And that the shutters were closed, she added with a small sigh of relief. If they'd been opened, she had no doubt there would have been a pile of ash added to that small bloodstain over there on the floor...

Her blood.

The realization made her feel slightly nauseous. She'd have to clean that up soon. Better make that item number three.

But something nagged at the back of her mind, something about the shutters. Hadn't they been open? Rubbing her eyes, she dismissed the thought. Nick had probably closed them just before he'd left to keep unwanted visitors out and to make it look as though, for the day at least, he was maintaining his routine of closing them.

Natalie rose and went to the refrigerator. The door was lying in the middle of the kitchen floor, the hinges twisted and bent. With a sigh Natalie reached down and lifted it, amazed at how little effort it took. A quick examination of the damage to the hinges on the refrigerator unit itself revealed that she could do a quick patch up, provided she could bend the hinges back into place. She wouldn't be able to use this door, but at least the thing would still be functional.

She cleaned up the blood and the broken bottle first, then hefted the door again. Holding it up with one hand, she grasped the twisted and torn pieces of metal that comprised the top hinges and easily bent them together. It wasn't pretty, but it would hold, she thought as she leaned down and squeezed the lower one together as well. The door ended up being a little crooked, and not quite aligned with the seal, but Natalie decided she wasn't going to get it any better. At least vampirism was proving to be useful for those annoying home repair chores, she thought.

Carefully opening the other door, Natalie counted the bottles. There were three more full bottles. Considering the fact that she had a pretty good idea of how much blood a normal, healthy vampire required, as well as how much she'd guzzled just a short while ago, this wasn't going to last very long. Dismayed, she realized Nick had been drinking human blood on a very regular basis lately, though under the circumstances she couldn't complain. As much as she might hate the idea, right now she was far better off with human blood than cow. Richard...

There he was again, an unwanted spectre. Another mental door to slam and deal with later. She still had items on her list to get to and he wasn't even on it.

Crouching down, she pulled open the freezer. A bag of blood tumbled out. Natalie reached down and picked it up, hefting it in her hand. A quick glance at the date told her it was still fresh enough. Setting it aside, she reached in and pulled out five more bags, two of which had expired. She'd hang onto them anyway. She might need them in an emergency. Placing them carefully on the counter to thaw , she pulled a bottle out and uncorked it. It was tempting to just rip the cork out, tip the bottle up and drink the whole thing down without any thought. In fact, she very nearly did. But that would be stupid; she didn't have a readily available supply of blood at hand.

And she was already hungry. Feeling those horrible pangs she'd experienced upon waking up beginning to twist again inside her, she knew she should indulge the hunger, keep it at bay as best she could until she could get a supply. Reaching up, she took down a glass from the shelf, holding it gingerly and filled it with blood. The smell of it made her mouth flood with saliva. One part of her made note of that fact. But she was predominantly focused on the blood in the glass as if there was nothing else in the world. But she forced herself to replace the cork and put the bottle back into the refrigerator before picking up the glass.

And then she gulped down half the contents of the glass before she could stop herself.

Shaking slightly, she sat the glass down on the counter, putting both physical and mental distance between herself and it. It horrified her, this lack of control, her worst nightmare lived out in reality.

What was that second thing on her list?

It was a deliberate ploy to distract herself. And it worked.

Forcing herself to be calm, controlled, she casually picked up the wine glass and carried it with her to the couch, consciously trying not to think about how hard it was not to take one sip, then another, then another from the glass. With deliberate care, she sat the glass down on the coffee table, picked up the remote, and sank down into the leather cushions.

She realized that she was still in a state of shock and was grateful for it, actually. It helped to keep the horror of the situation...*everything*...at bay for a bit. It left her detached but functional. During her intern days in the emergency room, Natalie had often marveled at the concept of shock, both psychological and emotional. While the consequences could be devastating if prolonged, it was also an amazingly adaptive response to trauma, a biological stop-gap measure. Then, it had been more of an abstract concept though she saw the effects of it in nearly everyone who was rushed from the scene of an accident. Now, this brief grace period was allowing her to take steps toward ensuring her survival in the long run.

And she *would* survive. She would take the information she had gained from six years of studying Nick and use it to her advantage in this situation.

She *would* survive.

Her hand as it reached out for the glass on the table was almost steady, and what little tremor remained Natalie pretended simply didn't exist. Making a conscious effort to sip the blood slowly, she turned her attention to the screen, leaving the sound muted. The last thing she needed right now was some blaring announcer undermining her concentration when she needed it most.

Normally Natalie opted for the quick news updates on the radio on her way to work, and now she was acutely reminded of the advantages of that approach. Though this was the era of sound bites and quick cuts, most channels assumed that viewers had a longer attention span and therefore did not provide crucial information every thirty seconds.

Not that the date would be *that* crucial to the average person, Natalie reflected grimly. Only the newly undead coroner in town would have need of such information.

But patience paid off soon enough, and Natalie leaned back a little further against the cushions in despair.

Almost two days had passed while she'd been...sleeping.

Two days.

She knew from the experience with Richard that a substantial amount of time had most likely passed, but two days? Why hadn't anybody come to the loft looking for either her or Nick? Had he done something to mislead them, keep them off the trail?

From finding her body before he made his getaway?

The thought came unbidden, and she felt something vile rise in her throat. It made a horrible kind of sense, though. And Nick certainly had experience with abrupt departures before.

No, she reassured herself that it was simply a case of the police not having

enough reason for a search warrant. The police had no official reason to get in, she decided. Nick's alarm system might have made things difficult as far as access was concerned, but Natalie was well aware that the police had ways of dealing with problems like that. They could have access if they needed it.

For one insane second, Natalie wondered if she really *had* died and was in some horrible kind of purgatory. Was she doomed to spend her days in solitude, trapped in this loft looking for a supply of blood for her sins? At the moment is seemed all too fitting and completely ridiculous all at the same time. Natalie dropped her head wearily in her hands. As soon as the sun went down she could test the theory soon enough, and there was always the phone....

She sat bolt upright, cursing herself for being an idiot. "Become a vampire, lose all your brain cells," she muttered to herself thinking that certainly explained a lot about Nick. Pulling her legs beneath her, she turned and leaned over the back of the couch to look at the blinking light on the answering machine.

Someone had tried to call. Several someones. A lot of someones given the number of blinks. Natalie couldn't decide if that was a good sign or a bad sign.

The first one was from Joe Reese, with the news about Tracy.

Tracy... The memory sent a pang through Natalie. She had completely forgotten about Tracy. She'd missed the memorial service and probably the funeral.

The next dozen calls were from Reese, his voice filled with warning, eventually informing Nick that there was to be a formal investigation into the circumstances surrounding Tracy Vetter's death and that he was to make himself available for questioning. That message was on there several times, and Reese's voice turned pleading.

In the midst of the messages from Reese was an empty one. No one spoke. Even though the call had come in probably a good twenty-four hours ago, the sense of fear and anxiety coming across the line was palpable. Natalie strained her ears but could hear nothing on the tape. It was as if the call came from a huge black void. It disturbed her.

When the messages ended, Natalie reached over and lifted the receiver off the hook, then dialed. She'd never actually called The Raven before, but there were a couple of nights a few months ago when she'd dialed the number, even let it ring once or twice. She knew Nick was there and had on several occasions given in to anger and temptation and nearly called him.

Never, in any of her wildest dreams, would she ever have imagined she would be calling The Raven for the reason she dialed the number now.

Natalie started when she heard the familiar three tone beep that indicated something was wrong. The electronic voice informed her that the number was no longer in service. Frowning, Natalie disconnected and dialed again with no better luck. She had the right number, she was certain.

Fighting down a sudden rush of panic, Natalie checked her watch again. Someone *had* to be there, she reasoned. There was just something wrong with the phone lines, that was all. It would be dark enough for her to venture out in less than an hour. She would go to The Raven and find out what was going on herself. Someone had to be there.

Because Natalie didn't know what she was going to do if they were gone.

Restlessly, she rose and wandered around Nick's living room, her steps echoing hollowly throughout the loft. She'd started to tremble again, at some point; she didn't know when. Nothing seemed to make it stop, either. But, she figured pragmatically, she was about due for some kind of breakdown. This remarkable facade of calm, of rationality, had started crumbling the moment she'd realized she was drinking blood. Maybe if she let herself go for a while, she'd be more successful at reigning it in, rather than waiting until it forced itself out, to potentially disastrous results.

She wasn't very good at the former. In fact, by her reckoning, she was an expert in the latter, but now she couldn't afford the luxury. As she wandered around the loft willing herself to let go, to relax, she spotted the small, ornate mirror Nick had hanging on the wall near the television. It was cracked. Funny, she didn't remember it being cracked before She walked toward it slowly, in wonder.

A stranger looked back at her.

A stranger with flawless, white skin, and a mane of shining curls. But it was the eyes that caught her attention the most. They were normally the stand-out feature of her face, when her hair was cooperating, that was. But now...now they practically glowed, dark and luminous. Hypnotic eyes. Powerful eyes.

She watched herself in the mirror as if she were in a dream, her hand drifting slowly to her cheek. This was real. It had happened. Those frightening eyes looking back out at her, taking in every detail, drove the reality home for her like nothing had before. Not her careful assessment of the facts. Nor the blood.

She was a vampire.

"Hi there," she said, addressing her reflection, her tone wry. "We haven't met. But something tells me we're going to be together for a long, long time."

Her weary, amused expression nodding reassuringly back at her helped, though it still seemed odd, surreal. This was her new face, her new existence. This would definitely take some getting used to, she mused.

A thought occurred to her and she stepped forward. Pushing the edge of her lip up she carefully examined the eye tooth on that side. It was disappointing, actually, she decided. There was a slight change in the tooth, which protruded no further than it normally had, and it was definitely more pointed. With the index finger of her free hand she carefully probed the gum above it. It didn't feel any different.

But she had to admit that there *was* a distinct difference, even beyond the physical ones she'd already noted in Nick and now herself. It was hard to put her finger on it, but she was more...aware...of those two particular teeth than the others, that they were somehow more sensitive. Or, she reasoned, they were placed strangely in her jaw due to the metamorphosis wrought by the change.

With another glance at the mirror, Natalie wondered how she could make them descend even as another voice wondered if she even wanted to do that. She quieted that second voice. She needed to know as much as she could.

Actually, she thought, what she needed were her notes. When she'd first met Nick she'd questioned and examined him at length on his physiology. He'd allowed her to examine his teeth, take blood samples, all the various physical things she'd asked. Nick had been surprisingly forthcoming, and at the time she knew he was still testing her, still possibly attempting to scare her away, though he'd been unsuccessful at it. They'd talked about the physical manifestations of his vampirism, what brought the teeth

and fangs on, such as extreme hunger or anger. And Natalie knew he could control that when he wanted to, bring down the teeth and make his eyes glow at will. Was that something that one had to learn or did it come naturally? Natalie looked at her teeth again and willed them to descend.

Nothing.

Damn.

Obviously not something that came naturally then. With a last look at the mirror, Natalie tilted her head to the side. No marks, nothing to indicate that she'd been bitten and nearly drained of all her blood. There weren't even scars.

With a sigh, Natalie turned away from the mirror and looked slowly around the loft. As far as she could tell Nick hadn't taken *anything* with him. Nothing on the ground floor had been disturbed, and she was certain that if she went up to the second level she would find the same. A quick investigation of the bedroom and bathroom bore out that assumption.

Standing up on the second level, Natalie leaned against the railing and chewed her lip thoughtfully. It was almost dark. She'd be able to go out soon. Should she use the street entrance, or would someone be there? It was a likely possibility, even if Nick hadn't officially been charged with anything, particularly if he were missing. And she realized it wouldn't take much to block off the building. It was a solitary structure in a fairly deserted part of town. Nick was the only inhabitant, and had, in fact, owned the entire building and several others nearby to ensure his privacy, a fact she'd only discovered about a year ago. The only entrance at street level was through the garage and easily blocked off, and the only access to the roof was up and through the building.

The roof. As she considered her options, she began to think it was her best bet. It was doubtful that anyone was up there. Going downstairs to investigate had its problems--she couldn't risk being seen by *anyone* until she was ready. And truthfully, she was more than a little frightened at the prospect of any plan that might put her in close proximity to anyone.

To mortals, she corrected herself and immediately felt uncomfortable for having done so.

The roof it was, she decided, and made her way back down to the main floor of the loft. Nick usually kept the stairwell door locked from the inside unless he knew she was coming. It was locked now.

In the stairwell, Natalie paused and winced, unable for a moment to think or assimilate the surge of sound that suddenly overwhelmed her senses. She could hear *everything*--traffic noises, conversations, the rumbling of trains. All the inherent clamor of the metropolis assailed her ears. For an insane moment, Natalie reflexively tried to identify and sort through them, to recognize snatches of conversations. It was when she became aware that she could hear thousands of heartbeats that she clapped her hands over her ears and ducked back into the loft, into blissful silence once the door closed behind her.

She didn't know why it had never occurred to her before. She'd never thought about it really, but given what she'd just experienced, it made perfect sense. It was the only way he could have coped, the only way he could have had peace and quiet, if only for a part of the day.

The loft was soundproofed, and remarkably well. Barely a stray noise slipped

through.

"Is it always like this?" she asked aloud, her voice laced with despair. How hard it must have been for Nick, especially the heartbeats, the constant thrumming, the reminder of food so close for the taking--

With an abrupt shake of her head she shook off those dangerous thoughts. How was she going to move about the city with all the noise assaulting her senses? She knew it was only going to get worse. She'd just had a small taste of what the auditory capacity of a vampire was like. There was no telling how augmented and tortuous the other senses were. How was she going to manage? She could smell bottled blood in the refrigerator as clearly as if someone were waving it under her nose. How on earth was she going to cope with being out in a city full of blood?

Natalie leaned back against the stairwell door and allowed the knowledge of just how desperate her situation was to sink in. There was a huge, noisy, dangerous world out there, and for all her newborn strength and sensory acuity, for all the data she'd amassed over the years, she was an infant. She *wasn't* going to survive alone. She needed help.

She needed Nick.

The thought of him now was enough to abruptly send her on a steep, downward spiral as her legs gave out beneath her. She sat huddled against the wall, knees drawn up to her chest, arms clasped tightly around herself, and rocked. Nick had done this to her, he was to blame. She'd believed in him, had faith in him that he would take only a little, that they would find the cure they were both desperately seeking.

She'd believed with every last fiber of her being that they'd be together, that he wanted it as much as she did.

That was a lie, she realized that now. Nick had given in to her out of guilt, out of his own anguish. He'd lied to her. He'd lied to himself.

But knowing that did nothing to change the fact that she was here, that he'd left her alone.

All alone.

She pressed her face against her knees and allowed the tears to come, the shuddering sobs that wracked her body with such force that it *hurt*. Damn him to hell for doing this to her. And damn her for pushing him into doing it.

The pain washed over her. Tears for Nana, for her parents, for Richard. For Cynthia, for Schanke, Cohen, Tracy, Lora--for all the people she'd loved and lost, for all those souls who'd left her behind to cope with the questions and the void their absence created. There were angry tears for Nick, for Janette, and at last, for herself as well, for all the different lives she might have led, all the paths she might have, *should* have followed that led anywhere but to this.

After a long while she leaned back and looked down almost unfeelingly at the dark crimson stains on her skirt. Though she rarely indulged in crying jags, and this one had to be the mother of all crying jags, some part of her had to admit she did feel better, cleaner. Some of the tension had eased out of her body, and while she still felt vulnerable, afraid and horribly out of control, almost raw, she was also filled with an uneasy sense of...something. Not quite peace.

Equilibrium, perhaps.

She drew in a deep calming breath and thought about going outside again, about

the inherent problems with leaving the quiet and safety of the loft. She couldn't stay here, she knew that. She was going to have to leave sometime and the sooner she tackled the problem, found a practical solution, the better off she would be.

OK, so all the sound was going to be a problem. Natalie leaned her head back against the wall and forced herself to think about the problem. Earplugs? She quickly ruled that one out, reasoning that it probably wouldn't work that well, and any makeshift pair she could fashion would be less than adequate. And she doubted that Nick kept a pair handy; he'd never mentioned using them.

Natalie smiled to herself as a sudden image of herself walking about Toronto, hands clapped over her ears humming "God Save the Queen" or some other such nonsense filled her mind.

But it did give her an idea, and she quickly pushed herself up off the floor and walked over to her purse which she'd left on the kitchen table. She couldn't *block* the sounds out completely, but maybe she could give herself a dominant sound that she could focus on, that would allow her to tune out everything else. She had a walkman in her purse, one she barely ever used. As such, the batteries were probably dead or close to it, which might render it useless. Fortunately, she had a fairly fresh set in her hand-held tape recorder in her bag, which, out of habit she'd carried up with her when she'd arrived several days ago.

Yep, the batteries were dead, and Natalie wondered briefly about her own taste in music when she found an Erasure tape in the walkman. She quickly replaced them, then walked over to Nick's stereo and selected a tape of piano concertos that Nick had sitting out on the shelf. It was dusty. Brushing it off, Natalie slipped it into the walkman, carefully put the headphones into her ears and pressed the play button.

And nearly dropped the walkman when music blasted painfully into her ears. Recovering herself quickly, Natalie quickly turned the volume way down, amazed at how clear and *loud* the music coming from this little machine was. Not to mention all the whirring of the little gears and the tape heads that she could hear clearly as a backdrop to the music.

Twisting the dial carefully Natalie was able to find a music level that she was comfortable with.

Time to test the effectiveness of this, she decided, heading toward the stairwell door. Once there she hesitated, steeling herself for the onslaught of information that would pour into her as soon as she opened the door. But she had to know. With a quick twist of the stairwell door knob, Natalie opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

She could still hear the sounds, but the music was helping, muted them, pushed them into the background where they could be dealt with, not processed. Natalie sighed in relief. One thing she definitely needed, in addition to blood she reminded herself wryly, would be batteries, until she could practice dealing with all the noise without the music.

With the strains of a piano filling her ears, and thousands of heartbeats running as counterpoint vaguely behind it, Natalie quietly climbed the two flights of stairs to the door that lead to the roof of Nick's apartment building. The door that led out onto the blacktop roof was locked from the inside. Quickly twisting the lock, Natalie stepped out for the first time into the night.

The first thing to catch her attention as she walked out were the stars. She'd never seen the stars, never *really* seen them, seen the flickers and the *colors*, and now she knew why Nick often liked to come up here and look out at the night sky. The stars seemed to dip down out of the heaven to twinkle just for her as her gaze passed over them. They were so close, Natalie was certain all she had to do was lift her hand, sweep it across the heavens, and her hand would be filled with sparkling jewels. It was breathtaking.

And it reminded her of something, of a far happier evening spent out on this very roof. Tearing her gaze away from the sky, Natalie looked around and saw that it was exactly where he'd left it, though he'd taken the precaution of throwing a waterproof tarp over top of it. Walking over, she carefully shifted the stones that held the covering down away with her foot and pulled the tarp away. They'd used it to view the comet that had passed by several weeks ago. He'd' bought the telescope, a ridiculously powerful and sophisticated one for strictly amateur use, just for her. He hadn't needed it.

Lovingly, Natalie ran her hand over the barrel of the scope, and leaned down to look through the eye piece Nick had spent hours adjusting for her so that she could get the best, clearest view. So that she could have some inkling of what the sky looked like through his eyes, she thought suddenly, though it seemed so inadequate in light of her new vision.

"Ten thousand years," she'd said, her voice teasing. "Finally, something in my life that's *older* than you!"

He'd laughed as he'd looked up at the sky. "That's about the worst pick-up line I've ever heard," he'd said playfully.

"Um, how about 'what's your sign?' then?" she'd returned. "Seems appropriate, all things considered," she'd added, glancing up at the sky.

"Can you see the colors in the tail, Nat?" he'd asked.

"Show off!" she'd admonished. "Next thing you know, you'll be telling me how many times you've seen Haley's Comet."

He'd glanced down at her then. "Never, actually. I was never very interested in the skies," he'd said. "Fleur was, though," he added.

She'd tilted her head at that, choosing her next words carefully. "Fleur?" she'd asked.

But he was already gone, off in some other time, some painful memory, and Natalie knew only too well what it was, given the pain in his expression as he'd looked back over at her, at the abrupt halt he'd called to the evening.

She hadn't been able to get him to talk about it, and had finally left him to brood, sad and frustrated and angry at no one and everyone, especially LaCroix and the silly charade he was forcing her, forcing Nick to play.

Yet he'd bought the telescope for her, and had seemed to take so much joy in sharing the rare voyager's visit with her that night. She remembered and loved the wonder in his face, his voice, recalled her own excitement as they'd gazed up together at the stars, the way his head was tilted so far back, the fingers of the hand he had around her shoulders squeezing and caressing her lightly.

Oddly enough, seeing the telescope again served as a hopeful reminder of how much more she and Nick might share once she managed to get through this nightmare and whatever ensuing nightmares the coming nights might bring. A small corner of her

heart had already started on the long journey toward forgiving him for leaving her behind. *That* she didn't find odd at all. That felt like home.

A small piece, a small peace indeed, a flicker really that was in danger of being blown out of existence by the fear and anger still cascading inside her. A reunion with Nick, whatever form it was going to take, was a long way away. She had yet to get through a single night in her new state. It was decided; Nick was simply going to have to wait until she took care of a few important matters first.

Remembering the real reason why she'd come up here, Natalie walked carefully over to the edge and looked down. Her car was parked out in front of the building, and Nick's caddie was pulled haphazardly onto the curb next to it, parked illegally as usual. A man in a blue uniform was leaning casually against it, arms crossed in front of him, looking intensely bored. Another one was sitting in a car parked across the street. He was sipping something from a Styrofoam cup. Coffee, she thought as she caught a whiff of the beverage.

'Toronto's finest all right. Natalie didn't see any of the tell-tale yellow and black tape which meant this wasn't a crime scene, though she already knew that. They were here to keep an eye on things.

She turned and sat down, shielded from sight by the waist-high wall that surrounded the roof. Not that that was really a problem. Those guys looked like they were barely able to stay awake.

Natalie took a moment to consider the implications. Reese had talked about a pending investigation, yet no one had searched the loft, either because they couldn't get a warrant or a real reason to search the loft hadn't as yet presented itself. At best she and Nick were considered missing, and she'd have to remain that way. Which meant her usual resources as far as money and information were out of the question..

Though she and Nick had never really discussed it, she knew damn well he was loaded. All one had to do was look around the loft to realize that. He had that air, too. Natalie had overheard one or two cops comment on Nick's aura of wealth, of refinement, of not really being one of them. If only they knew just how right they were, she thought ruefully. She'd meant to broach the subject with him; the comments made just within her hearing were warnings from the other officers who thought Nick was on the take, letting her hear so that she could mention it to him so he'd be more careful. They were afraid he was going to blow it for all of them.

All right. Nick had...drained her, assumed he'd killed her, panicked, and ran, ducked out of town like there was no tomorrow. Nick had the money to do that, and even if he didn't, LaCroix, or possibly even other members of the vampire community would most certainly cover for him, one way or the other.

It seemed a likely scenario and explained a lot. Not that it did her any good. Her car was parked in plain sight of the two guards downstairs, effectively cutting off her access to it. Which meant, in turn, that it cut off her access to everything; money,, blood, fresh batteries.

The last brought a small smile to her lips. The walkman idea was working far beyond her expectations. She could still hear the sounds of the city, but muted in a manner that she could handle. Given enough time, Natalie was certain she could train herself to deal with the onslaught of information by gradually turning down the volume during her trips out. For the time being, though, this arrangement would allow her be

outside without going mad. A good thing, she decided.

Only a few scant hours had passed since the beginning of her new existence as a vampire. Though it felt like she had accomplished much, Natalie knew she'd barely scratched the surface of her problems. Her situation was beyond desperate. While she had conquered the problem of going outside the safety of the loft, she was still, in effect, trapped in the building..

And just to remind her not to become too complacent, the hunger began to tear at her again; she could *smell* the two officers below, the scent of blood mixed with nicotine and spearmint gum and coffee torpedoing up to her. And just beyond that was the scent of others, nearby. Others living in alleys, stinking of neglect and alcohol, of others further out past that, smelling of perfume and sweat and garlic and cologne.

Human scent.

Food scent.

It was time to go in, time to go downstairs and feed on what little bottled or bagged blood she had left before the awareness of food close by turned into action. Before she acted on the flaring of her nostrils and the flooding of saliva into her mouth, before she turned into the swift hunter her new nature demanded she be. That she could not allow.

Rapid movement seemed to be fairly instinctual, she realized as she found herself standing at the stairwell door that lead to Nick's loft almost without realizing that she'd decided to move.

This time it took two more bottles of her precious, dwindling supply before she could think of anything except appeasing the tendrils of hunger twisting through her body.

As she lowered the second bottle from her lips, Natalie reached a decision. She couldn't get to her car, but she *had* to get to The Raven, had to secure herself a steady supply of blood or do something, become something she knew she would not be able to live with

She would have to fly.

God, it sounded completely ridiculous, reaching a conclusion like that. But she knew Nick could fly, had seen him do it on occasion, though he had never offered to take her flying. Not that she would have asked, but secretly, she wouldn't have said no if he had. It was the one ability he had that she truly and honestly envied, though she would never admit that to him. Yes, she'd once joked that she wanted him to teach her how to hypnotize people. But the flying? That was different. That was freedom, and nobody had to get hurt in the process. She knew it was one of the few guilt-free powers he had, and he reveled in it.

Now she wished she had. Hell, now she wished she'd asked him and demanded answers to a thousand questions he, no doubt, would have found awkward and painful and embarrassing, but the answers to which she would have found invaluable considering the circumstances.

But that wasn't an option, and she wasn't one to dwell too long on what she didn't or couldn't have, but make the most of what she *did* have. She might not have much at the moment, but she did have her intellect, her limited knowledge of vampires and above all else, her willingness to try.

Flying suddenly didn't seem quite so ridiculous.

Making her way back up to the roof, Natalie stood near the edge farthest away from the front of the building where the cars were parked. She didn't have the first clue about exactly how she was supposed to fly. For all she knew, it was something instinctive, like the teeth. Tilting her head back, Natalie looked up at the sky and concentrated very hard on being up there, among the stars.

Of course it didn't work, and Natalie lowered her eyes, feeling more like some morbid, silly Tinkerbell than a vampire. With a sigh Natalie looked over the edge at the deserted alley below. She could always try simply jumping off the building and hope that instinct kicked in. It wasn't like the fall could kill her. Stupid idea, though, since she'd have no way of getting back in if it didn't work. Besides, she'd seen Nick fly at will so it could be done. It was simply a matter of figuring out how.

She could try the ledge, the small half-wall that ran around the circumference of the roof. It was wide enough to stand on. She could try jumping from that while concentrating on flying, just to see what would happen. Provided she could curtail her embarrassment over it. She certainly hoped no one was watching her right now.

Before she could second-guess herself out of it, Natalie clambered up onto the foot-wide ledge. Closing her eyes, she visualized herself being airborne, bent her knees and pushed herself off of the ledge with all her might, arms spread wide.

She shot across half the width of the roof, and landed face down and spread-eagled, skidding for a foot or so across the blacktop. She also discovered that while she may be a vampire, skinned knees and elbows stung, though not quite as badly or for as long as they had when she'd been a little girl. In fact, she spent a fascinating thirty seconds watching the skin on her right knee heal and become flawless. She'd seen Nick heal up before her eyes from serious injuries such as burns and bullet wounds and such. But there was something almost irresistible about watching a minor abrasion that *should* have left a scar disappear without a trace in a matter of seconds on her own body.

Slowly, Natalie stood, wondering what on earth to try next. The only other thing she could think of was to simply jump straight up into the air. Which of course led to a really ridiculous image of her *bouncing* her way to The Raven through the streets of Toronto that nearly made her laugh out loud.

She'd tried imagining herself flying, then giving herself a boost while imaging herself flying. Maybe the flaw in her reasoning was in thinking that being able to fly was a state of mind. Or maybe her problem was that she was thinking of flying as a mental state in and of itself rather than as something that had a greater purpose. And she didn't need to be a genius to figure out what that other purpose was.

Hunting.

This was dangerous. This was beyond dangerous.

She'd just fed, but with the two guards so close, in so much danger, Natalie wasn't sure she wanted to even try this little experiment, all too aware that it could end in disaster for herself and at least one other unfortunate person. However, she didn't see that she had that much of a choice. And it might not work.

Swallowing, Natalie climbed back up on the ledge. Then she closed her eyes and allowed herself to hear the heartbeats that slipped in past the music filling her ears. She thought about blood, about the taste of it, about the contentment of it, and she launched herself up into the air, bending her knees and pushing up from the ledge with all her newfound strength.

And shot up. And up. And up.

At some point she opened her eyes. Big mistake. It broke her concentration which might have been a good thing because she found she'd shifted position enough so that she could swoop down on the guard lounging against the caddie. But she lost it. She was able to keep it together long enough to alter her trajectory enough so that she'd hit the roof again.

On the way down she discovered that flying in a skirt was a bad thing. She was *really* glad no one was watching.

This time she hit hard, much harder than before. This time she heard something crack. That was just moments before she blindly bit into the flesh of her forearm to keep herself from crying out, alerting the guards. She'd landed badly, her last minute attempts to adjust her position causing her to intersect with the roof at an awkward angle, despite the fact that she came down feet first. And of course she had no way to slow her descent down and hit the blacktop at full speed.

When the pain subsided to a dull roar Natalie twisted around. No compound fracture in her leg that she could see, But to her amazement she could feel the bones shifting around in her calf, rearranging and aligning themselves. It didn't hurt exactly, but it definitely felt strange. And within seconds, it was as if the fracture had never existed.

But she felt hungry again, and realized that the injury had taken precious energy. Deciding to push it just a little bit, thinking that part of mastering the new powers was understanding how far to push, Natalie lifted herself up off the roof, dusting her skirt off Boy was she a mess. Natalie didn't remember being this dirty and bloody since she was about nine years old and Timmy Lewis dared her to jump out of the big oak tree in the park. She'd broken her leg then, too, come to think of it.

She'd try it again, but this time focus on managing some kind of controlled descent. It seemed to require slightly less effort to become airborne, though it was no less disorienting, she realized, as she watched the roof slide away from her. She was pleased that she'd managed to keep her eyes open this time, without any adverse lapses in concentration. The wind whipped through her hair and tugged at her clothes as she rose in the air. With an effort she tried to keep herself focused on the building below her, rather than looking out at the breathtaking view of Toronto that hung before her. It was when she began to feel afraid of the drop, of injuring herself that she felt her ascent begin to slow.

Natalie decided it felt like she'd reached the top of a hill, or crested some pinnacle because she seemed to hover, to float suspended for several long, quiet seconds. It seemed to her as if the whole world stopped. Then, ever so slowly, then with increasing momentum she began to drop.

That's when she began to panic. Though the pain from the broken bone had only lasted for seconds, Natalie did not look forward to repeating the experience. Nor could she afford to expend the energy to repair the damage, knowing that it would cost her in blood. She did the only thing she could think of; she began another ascent. It worked. It slowed her down, then she was rising in the air again.

That was how she managed to get down to the roof again. She allowed herself to drop, then reversed it, since she seemed to have gotten the hang of going up. Her third landing, while not smooth, at least resulted in no injuries. Hadn't she read somewhere

that landing was the hardest and most dangerous part of learning how to fly a plane? Obviously that was as true for vampires as it was for mortal pilots.

A few more runs and she was maneuvering well enough around the roof, though one of them took her unintentionally close to the ledge that looked down on the guards, reminding her that she was getting *very* hungry. As her last run before going in, Natalie flew over and landed on the roof two buildings away, then returned, pleased to note that her landings were getting better with the practice. Now she felt fairly confident that she could navigate without crashing into an intersection and causing a major scene. Rooftops and alleyways would help, and if worse came to worse, she could walk along the street if it was deserted enough.

Back downstairs, she headed directly for the refrigerator and downed the last bottle of blood, not bothering with a glass. For good measure she ripped open one of the blood bags and drank that too. Glancing up at the big sun clock Nick had up on the wall over his unused stove, she realized she'd lost nearly four hours while up on the roof. It was after midnight, and she didn't know *exactly* what time dawn was. Though the bulk of the night remained, she thought she should hurry.

First thing she needed to do was clean up. She was dusty and covered with blood, and her clothes were basically ruined. Not that that was a problem--she'd just borrow something of Nick's. Whatever she could rummage out of his closet would no doubt be far more comfortable than what she was wearing now anyway.

Climbing the stairs to the second level, Natalie stripped off her ruined skirt, blouse and shredded panty hose. She really would have liked to take a shower, but settled for scrubbing the dried blood and dirt on her face, arms and legs away with hot water and soap. It made her feel instantly better, made her feel human again.

The thought made her pause, and she looked up at herself in the mirror. "That's not going to happen anytime soon," she admonished her reflection. She *wasn't* human anymore. But while there were fundamental changes in her senses, in the biological cravings which could overwhelm her, she didn't *feel* any different. She was *still* Natalie Lambert, Forensic Pathologist, and next to the night she'd met Nick, she'd just been handed the biggest set of puzzles she'd ever gotten in her life. Maybe she could write a book.

In the dresser she found a pair of black sweatpants. They were huge on her, but they stayed on when she pulled the drawstring tight. Next she pulled on a dark purple t-shirt. All she had with her were her dress shoes, which she'd kicked off during her flying lessons earlier. They really weren't appropriate, given the rest of the outfit. Nick had several pairs of really expensive sneakers (what was it with men and ridiculous sneakers?) stacked neatly in his closet. Two pairs of sweatsocks and a few tissues balled up in the toes and they fit. Or more correctly they stayed on her feet, though she felt like a circus clown, one of those guys with the huge feet. A simple rubber band tied most of her hair back out of the way. Another glance in the mirror and she decided she looked like a homeless person with expensive taste. Or a little girl who had just raided her father's closet, playing dress-up. The clothes held his scent, and for a brief moment it brought tears to her eyes.

Shaking off the image, Natalie looked through the remaining drawers and closets for anything else that might come in useful. There really wasn't much, though she did find a twenty dollar bill in the pocket of a pair of pants hanging on a hook in the

wardrobe. She also found a black raincoat she didn't remember him wearing in a long while and pulled that out too. It wasn't because the weather was that crisp out given that it was late spring or even that she really needed a jacket. It had lots of pockets, and that's what interested her most. Plenty of room for the remaining bags of blood in the refrigerator.

Deciding there was nothing more of value in the bedroom, she made her way downstairs. As she'd guessed, the blood bags fit nicely in the deep pockets of the coat. She also pulled a few things out of her purse, including her wallet and keys. Everything else, she decided, she would leave behind. The box she'd packed up at the morgue, that could stay, even the journal. She'd read it, she'd memorized it.

She'd learned from it. The hard way.

Buttoning up the coat, she carefully tied the belt so the coat wouldn't flap too much while she was up in the air. At the door she paused for one last look around. She wasn't certain if she'd be coming back here, though it was tempting to use this place as a haven. Probably not safe, though. So she just studied it for several moments, taking in every detail again to make sure she wouldn't forget it.

"You're stalling," she said finally. And she was. Despite all her preparations, all her planning, she was afraid to leave, afraid to go out. This was a safe place, a *familiar* place.

A controlled environment.

Outside everything was anything *but* controlled, filled with a thousand different variables she couldn't even begin to anticipate.

But she had to go out. Her life depended on it. With one last, final look around, Natalie bit her lip, pulled the headphones over her ears, and walked out into the stairwell. She stood with her back to the door until it had swung shut behind her determined not to look back. Then she continued up the steps.

The roof again. Checking her watch she saw it was close to one o'clock. There'd probably still be people about, but not too many. When it got too crowded she'd head for alleys or rooftops.

She'd driven to The Raven from Nick's place on quite a few occasions and was quite familiar with the route. Wishing she'd had more practice flying Natalie briefly considered trying to get all the way there using that means of transportation. But she quickly ruled it out. Sure, she'd *driven* to The Raven before. But trying to navigate the city from the air was another matter entirely. A study she'd read in a psychology class in college about cognitive mapping came to mind. Rats had no trouble *swimming* a maze they'd learned to walk through. If she flew, there was no way she'd find a straight line between here and the club. She'd have to follow the route she was familiar with. Which meant she'd have to be up in the air for a good ten to fifteen minutes. There was simply no way she could sustain flight for that long. She was lucky if she managed to stay up for a minute at a time.

But flight could take some time off of it, and get her out of potentially dangerous situation if she needed it. She estimated that it would take about forty minutes to walk to The Raven. Before she could talk herself out of the journey and went instead to huddle in the loft until she ran out of blood, Natalie launched herself into the night sky, heading for the roof of a nearby building.

She needed to get about three blocks over, which proved to be quite easy. This

was an industrial section of town and there were plenty of large buildings with flat roofs. Glancing up the street in the direction she needed to go, she saw a few roofs she could use. She also spotted an alley at an intersection about fifteen blocks ahead. Easier to drop down off this building here, in the shadows near the dumpster, and then walk for a bit.

Her landings were still not that great, but she did manage to miss the dumpster, though she tore a small hole in the knee of the sweatpants. Creeping up to the edge of the alley opening, she looked up and down the street. Traffic was light and pedestrian traffic was almost non-existent. She'd have to be careful, though and suddenly realized she should have worn a hat. The last thing she needed was to be spotted. Given all the calls from Reese on Nick's answering machine there was almost certainly an APB out on her, and every cop in the city would have her description.

Pulling the collar of the raincoat up, she waited until there was a break in traffic, then stepped out and began walking up the street. God, this was too nerve-wracking she decided, and almost turned back, intending to go up onto the roof. She felt too vulnerable, too exposed. But as she glanced behind her she saw several cars coming up and a young couple several yards behind her. That effectively cut off her retreat. Gritting her teeth, she turned back and fixed her eyes on her feet, concentrating on putting one before the other, tried not to think about how close the couple were.

Tried not to *sense* how close they were, though she could feel them approaching and picked up her pace. Their heartbeats were louder than all the others, penetrating the wall of music that filled her ears. And the heat from their bodies! That was almost more disconcerting than the sound of their hearts pumping, of the swishing of the blood in their veins.

They were having an argument. Natalie tried not to listen in, but she could hear every word. The man was doing most of the talking, admonishing the woman for something she'd said. She listened as the woman apologized, but that didn't seem to be enough for the man as he became more and more agitated. And with his rising anger Natalie sensed the increase in his heartbeat, and the air was filled with a peculiar, tangy scent more appealing than anything she'd ever smelled before in her life. It made her want to turn around and grab him...

The oversized sneakers slapped against the pavement. She was practically running, seeking to put as much distance between herself and the two people as she possible could. A little voice in the back of her mind reminded her that she must not draw attention to herself, and managed to stop just prior to breaking out into a run. The alley was just ahead, only four more blocks away. She could make it. She could make it.

Now the woman was getting angry too, and her scent, milder, not quite as spicy was mixing in with his. Natalie thought she would go mad if she didn't get away from them soon. She fought down the urge to whirl around, tell them to run as far away from her as they could, show them what a monster she had become...

That thought almost stopped her cold, but she forced her legs to keep moving. Only two more blocks, now. A monster? No, no. She had never allowed Nick to think that way about himself; she wasn't going allow herself to buy into that either. But at the moment it was *so hard* not to, when her mind was assaulted again and again by the image of her sinking her fangs into the man's neck, of the hot, heady tang of his blood as

it filled her mouth.

This time she did break into a run, shooting into the alley and digging frantically into her pocket for a bag of blood which she promptly tore into, vaguely aware that her fangs had descended for the first time. Part of her mind attended to the couple, and from their continued conversation she quickly surmised that they'd been too wrapped up in their argument to notice her abrupt disappearance.

In the shadow of the building she leaned against the wall shuddering and sucking desperately on the bag. As the blood, cold and somewhat congealed filled her mouth, the couple passed by only a few feet from her. Natalie tore into the bag again, squeezing the blood into her mouth, pushing every last drop out against her greedy tongue, then dropped it from trembling fingers and sat there panting for several long moments.

She was aware of the couple for several more blocks, until the sounds of their heartbeats faded and the scent of their blood receded to become indistinguishable from the scent of the thousands of others in the city.

Natalie passed a hand over her eyes, then pinched the skin above her nose, an old habit she wasn't quite sure where she'd picked up. She couldn't risk this. Or rather, she couldn't risk the lives of innocent people like this again. That had been too close. Had she not had all the blood just before leaving this encounter would have ended very differently.

No, she would have to make the rest of her journey in the shadows and on the rooftops. She couldn't walk among them just yet.

She rested and tried to calm her nerves for several more minutes, before launching herself up into the relative safety of the night sky again. She had to go out of her way to find a navigable route, going nearly a dozen blocks east, coming up to the club from the opposite side than she was used to. Thankfully she made it without too many flying mishaps, and no encounters with people whatsoever.

The back doors were closed tight. She'd have to make her way around to the front and hope the bouncer would let her in.

Natalie didn't hear any music coming from the club as she made her way around the building. When she'd been to the club before, including at least two times she'd rather forget, the music was easily audible from the street, even when the front doors were closed. Could they have closed up for the evening?

Turning the corner she saw that the street out near the main entrance of the club was deserted, and only a few cars were parked nearby. This was not a good sign. A knot settled in the pit of her stomach as she walked quickly over to the closed door.

The sign was still above the club, but there was a large poster on each door announcing that the club had closed. A heavy set of chains wound around the doorhandles and intertwined with a sturdy padlock.

"No!" Natalie said aloud, fingering the chains for a moment, then began pounding on the door with the palm of her hand. "Hello!" she yelled, not caring if anyone heard her or what they might think. "Somebody!" She pounded ineffectually for another minute, then stopped abruptly, running a hand through her hair. With a sinking feeling she realized there wasn't something wrong with the phone like she'd hoped.

They were gone.

Or rather *he* was gone. Of course LaCroix would clear out of town when Nick did. But somehow Natalie had hoped the club would still be open for business. Not

hoped; she *needed* the club. Without it she had nowhere to go, no one to turn to.

Maybe there were still a few of them still holed up in there. It was a desperate thought, she knew, but at the moment she decided that desperate measures for desperate times was anything but a cliché. But not out here, not in the front. She'd already spent enough time making a scene out here. The last thing she needed was for someone to call the cops because they thought some crazy woman was going to burglarize the place.

Natalie turned and glanced up and down the street. She didn't *think* anyone had seen her, but just to be on the safe side she casually walked away from the club, in full view of anyone who might be watching the front door. It was deserted enough, so she walked for several blocks then doubled back, landing once again at the back of the club.

She'd noted earlier that the doors were closed tightly, though there were no chains on them like on the front door. They were locked nonetheless and, in fact, had no handles on the outside. This was the delivery entrance of the club, which meant handles and locks were located on the inside.

Why was *nothing* easy, Natalie wondered, not for the first time this evening. Why couldn't there just be normal doors with normal handles that she could pull on just like every place else in the world? Then she noticed that they were designed to both be propped open at the same time in case any large crates or pieces of furniture needed to be moved into the club. As such, there was no central post. One door had a lip, probably a police guard to protect against crowbars that sat over top of the other one. If she could get a purchase on that she might be able to pull the door open.

It wasn't that wide of a lip, but Natalie thought she could get enough of a grip with her fingertips on the edge. Positioning her hands carefully she squeezed.

Just a little too hard as she felt the metal give beneath her fingers. When she pulled her hands away there were eight little indents where her fingers had been.

"Hmm," she said in an amused voice, blowing on the tips of her fingers. "I guess I don't know my own strength."

Bending down a little lower, Natalie tried again, making a concerted effort to not grip too hard. She was rewarded with the whine and creak of protesting metal when she tugged on the door. Another quick tug, a little harder, and she felt it shift beneath her hands. Setting her jaw, Natalie gave one final tug and the door flew open, almost hitting her in the face.

Dusting her hands off, Natalie stood in the doorway and peered inside breathing a small sigh of relief; she hadn't thought about an alarm until the door was swinging open toward her. "Hello?" she called, trying not to make her voice too loud. The ones she was looking for would hear her if she whispered. If there *was* anyone in there, she had no idea whether they were friendly or not. But she'd deal with that if and when the time came. If necessary, she'd *make* them be friendly.

She took a tentative step inside, looking around. There were no lights but she found she had no trouble at all seeing. It was as if all the corners and shapes and objects were illuminated by a spotlight sitting on the floor at an angle behind them. One thing she did note that was rather odd was that everything seemed to be tinged with red. Interesting, that actually. Was the color originating with her, or was she somehow specially tuned to pick up these long wavelengths? Vampires obviously had amazing visual acuity with their rod system, unlike humans. That might account for the red.

Natalie shook her speculation off. Plenty of time to be clinical later, she thought,

turning to pull the door shut behind her. No sense drawing attention, should someone pass by. As soon as it was closed, though, Natalie briefly considered opening it again. For some reason she'd found the ambient light washing a few feet into the hallway more reassuring than her night vision.

She was standing in a short hallway. She remembered this place. If she continued on down it, she'd find a small room. Janette had kept a bed there. Natalie didn't want to think about what LaCroix might have used it for. Just beyond that was the bar and the main dance floor of the club.

The air inside the club was still and quiet, but she could sense the passing of thousands of beings through it. The scent of stale sweat and smoke and blood assaulted her senses as she moved down the hallway. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Passing through the door behind the bar, Natalie looked out at the deserted club and knew that they were gone; they were all gone. The chairs had all been placed up on the tables, the chains and lights had been removed. The bar was empty. There wasn't even any litter to indicate that *anyone* had been here as recent as two days ago.

Knowing it was fruitless, she searched the premises anyway hoping to find some trace of them, some indication of where they might have gone. Natalie checked the small bedroom and found it empty. There was nothing but a chair and an empty filing cabinet in the office. All the radio equipment had been removed. Even the soundproof booth was gone. There was not one trace remaining to indicate that a late night radio personality named The Nightcrawler had ever broadcast from here.

Eventually she discovered the door to the wine cellar. It too was locked, causing hope to flare. But it was deserted, filled with dusty, empty racks. She even searched the walls and hunted around in every corner for some type of secret passage, a bolt hole.

Nothing.

They were all gone.

She finally gave up. Pulling down a chair from a table near the bar, she sank into it wearily and put her head down on her folded arms. What was she going to do now? It was nearly dawn. She was ravenously hungry again. Her batteries were dying. She realized she'd placed far too much hope in finding someone here who could help her. She should have come up with an alternate plan. Now the sun would be up in less than an hour and she would be trapped here all day.

Three bags of blood were not going to be enough. And Natalie was very afraid of what was going to happen when they were gone.

Blood bank, she thought morosely, resting her chin on her folded arms. She should have set aside part of the night for a visit to a blood bank. She'd already discovered she could travel around the city, though there was a certain danger in that. Vampires were built for hunting. She probably could have slipped inside undetected and stolen a supply of blood, one that would have lasted her the day.

Now she would have to make do with three bags, two of which were older than the expiration date. Not too much past, but she had no idea what effect it might have on her.

But she would be trapped inside all day. It wasn't like she could go anywhere, and if she could hold off, ration herself until dusk when she could head for the nearest hospital she might...

With a shake of her head, Natalie passed a weary hand over her eyes. She was

fooling herself, being overly optimistic. In her first hours as a vampire she'd already consumed a fairly large quantity of blood and she craved more even now with such intensity it was as if she'd never fed before at all. If she made it through the day with some shred of her sanity left she would be very lucky indeed.

With a sigh, Natalie sat upright and pushed her chair back. Rising, she made her way toward the wine cellar. A glance at her watch told her the sun would be coming up soon. Then a thought occurred to her. Could she sense the sunrise? Given that it was a vampire's deadliest enemy it only made sense that there would be some mechanism for that. She stopped in the middle of the room and closed her eyes.

At first, nothing. Then, as the seconds passed she became aware of a slight mental tingling, of a heaviness in her limbs that hadn't been there most of the night. She guessed that the sun was probably a few minutes away from making an appearance over the horizon. After all, it wouldn't be a very adaptive mechanism if it only informed her of the obvious after it was much too late to do anything about it.

"OK," she said, opening her eyes. She resumed walking down into the wine cellar. "That was interesting but useless. At least for right now." She'd have to remember to check it out again this evening.

Provided she was *capable* of that or whether she would be operating on instinct by then.

Grimly, Natalie slammed the door shut on those thoughts. Best not to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy by dwelling on it, she decided. She shrugged out of the raincoat and hung it carefully on the back of the door which she closed tightly. She wasn't exactly dressed for the ball now, she thought with a glance down at her baggy, extremely casual attire. The raincoat would hide a multitude of sins. Taking a deep breath, she switched off the walkman and slipped that into the pocket of the jacket. She'd chosen the wine cellar to spend the day in because it was under ground, more isolated. It wasn't soundproof, but Natalie thought she'd be all right down here for the day. If she was lucky she might even manage to get some sleep.

She certainly felt like it, she thought. The sun must have risen. That, as well as all the recent emotional and physical trauma she'd undergone were all beginning to take its toll on her. Maybe she'd be lucky enough to sleep the day undisturbed by the hunger. Resisting the urge to drink one of the bags before she tried to get some sleep, Natalie settled down in a relatively dust-free corner. Lying on her side, she pillowed her head on her arm and closed her eyes.

Sleep didn't come immediately, mostly because she couldn't relax. It was hardly surprising really. When she closed her eyes, the events of that last evening with Nick, the events of tonight played themselves out in front of her. Natalie wondered where he was right now, wondered what he was doing. Was he mourning her? Or had he truly moved on, adding her name to the top of his long list of guilts with which to torture himself? Until someone or something eventually replaced her. What would she say to him if she could see him right now?

The thoughts wouldn't stop, and most of them were too painful for her to dwell on. She had an eternity to deal with the pain, if she could survive the day and the night.

To give herself something else to think about she concentrated on the sounds of the city. Not the heartbeats, though they were, if anything, worse and louder and more insistent than they had been at night. Probably because most of them were asleep;

circadian rhythm demanded that everything slow down at night. Now, if she let them, they would pound against her ears, drowning out all possibility of thought.

No, she concentrated on the sounds of traffic, of people rising from their nightly slumber to face another day at work. She'd been one of them, only two days ago, she thought; now she sat huddled in a darkened abandoned nightclub trying not to think about the lethal differences that distinguished her from them. Trying to ignore the hunger. She concentrated on the conversations, listened to the voices, hoping to find one among the vibrations of the city that she recognized.

But all she could hear were the voices of strangers.

She wasn't aware of falling asleep, only of the noises of the city sliding into a void that ended in a dream.

All change is not growth; as all movement is not forward.

--Ellen Glasgow

Second night...

She was out on the street, back among mortals, and there were a pair of heartbeats, slightly out of sync, throbbing throughout her entire body. Lifting her eyes, she saw them ahead of her; a man and a woman deep in an argument. They were alone on the street. No one would notice. No one would miss them.

She edged closer, stalking them. She was just behind them when they noticed her and began to run away. As if they could, she thought. It was almost amusing to watch them scamper away from her.

A mere thought and she was in front of them, the only evidence of her flight a small breeze that scattered a few papers around on the street. The woman screamed, a frightening, exciting sound. But when Natalie seized the man she stood there, silent, the smell of her terror thick in the air.

The woman was the real prize, the real treat. She'd finish with the man quickly. Natalie tilted her head back, preparing to strike. She hissed, then...

For a panicked moment, Natalie couldn't figure out where in the world she was. It should have been dark, but her surroundings looked strangely lit and distinct if unfamiliar. And she realized she was standing near her coat, sucking desperately on a bag of blood. From the flat taste, it was one of the expired ones, too. It took several groping moments to shake off the remnants of the dream that were still clinging to her, and for her to recognize her surrounds. She'd gotten up and gone to the blood while still in her sleep. The thought terrified her almost more than anything else--that she had answered the blood's call from her dream.

With a shudder she brushed her fingers across her damp forehead, a shudder that renewed itself when she saw her fingers were covered with blood.

She was sweating blood.

She knew that; Nick had told her that he often woke up bathed in a fine sheen of blood perspiration. But somehow the knowing did little to prepare her for the reality in this case, and it did absolutely nothing for the gross-out factor. Making small noises of disgust she began frantically wiping the moisture from her face with her hands and sleeves, realizing too late that it was staining her only shirt.

Hoping the water was still on in the building, Natalie made her way up to the washroom. The door was locked, but one quick shove caused it to fly off its hinges to

land with a clatter in the middle of the women's lavatory. The electricity had definitely been turned off--not that it mattered. So had the water, she soon discovered as only a trickle of water ran out of the first one she tried. Gathering up a few paper towels, Natalie wet them down at the next faucet and scrubbed at her face and neck, after being thoroughly horrified at her reflection in the mirror.

The blood had clumped in her hair too, causing her bangs to stiffen and stick up from where she'd run her hand through them earlier. Once she'd gotten her face clean, Natalie used the remaining water to work the blood out of her hair. Drying off, she glanced back down at her watch.

It was only ten am. She still had most of the day to get through.

The remaining two bags didn't make it until noon, though she was fully awake when she consumed both of them. In fact she was afraid to go back to sleep. She finished them off because she simply couldn't stand the pain anymore. Natalie didn't even bothered to consider *trying* to save all or part of a bag for later. All that mattered was easing the gut-wrenching hunger *now*.

Just before three she curled up in the corner of the cellar, weeping and shivering. She'd pulled the raincoat on again after feeling a chill steal over her, but it did nothing to warm her. "Nick, where are you?" she moaned. "I need you so much." In fact, Natalie was pretty certain that had LaCroix shown up just then, she would have jumped up and thrown her arms around his neck in gratitude.

But there was no one; just her and the hunger. She tried naming the bones of the wrist as a distraction. After discovering she couldn't remember the mnemonic she'd used in medical school to learn them, she forgot why she needed to remember it in the first place.

At four, Natalie couldn't take anymore. She was only barely aware of making the decision to go out, to give up. She struggled to her feet and stumbled up the steps, falling to her knees once. Then she blindly made her way past the bar, down the little hallway to the door that lead outside to the loading area. She had to get out. She had to end the hunger and there were people out there. There was food out there.

But all of her senses screamed at her to move away from the door. Natalie didn't even manage to get within six feet of it. Before she could grab it and open it, she fled in absolute terror back into the dark recesses of the club, back down the stairs, as far away from the lethal light as possible.

Sleep was impossible. *Thinking* was impossible. Misery was the only option.

She couldn't go out. There was nothing to eat. She returned to the far recesses of the cellar to huddle in the darkness, shaking with hunger.

There were rats in the walls. She could hear them scratching about. More importantly, she could hear their rapid heartbeats and smell their blood. And she tried getting to them. Jumping to her feet she ripped down the two closest racks, raising a huge cloud of dust. When she found their tunnels she shoved her hand down them, hoping to seize one of them by the tail. But they'd been alerted to her presence by all the sounds she'd made, and had darted out of reach. She could sense them running away and there was nothing she could do to stop them, though she tried, clawing away huge chunks of dirt and wood and stone until her fingers bled.

Natalie was stretched out flat on the floor, one arm buried to the shoulder in one of the rat tunnels when she sensed him. He might have been there at the edges of her

awareness all this time.

She didn't know; she didn't care. He was out there now, nearby.

Pulling her arm out, she slowly rose to her feet, all but a small portion of her attention focused on the man in the alley, the rats forgotten in favor of better prey. She could hear him going through the dumpster near the back of the building. She could smell the filth and alcohol on him. As she reflexively dusted off her clothes and started to climb the stairs feeling as if she were in a trance he finished his search and stopped to drink something. Then settled down near the dumpster to sleep. Natalie could hear his soft snoring as she made her way upstairs. She could smell his blood.

And it was almost dark.

The hunger pains continued, more violent now that food was close. It was torture. She stood near the bar and listened to the small sounds he made in his sleep. His snoring had gotten louder, and Natalie caught the smell of cheap whisky.

But all that was secondary, only registered as a backdrop to the smell of his blood. She could hear it. That and the beating of his heart, punctuated by the occasional premature contraction of his ventricles, made a strange sort of music, a siren call.

The sun would be down in a matter of moments. She stood ready, the pain still coursing through her body, but largely ignored as she listened. In her mind she saw the alley again, from above, when she'd landed. She saw it with such clarity that she knew exactly how many steps would take her to where he lay. The dumpster wasn't that far from the street, but he was behind it, shielded from view.

She could always bring him inside if she needed to.

Almost time. She covered the short distance from the bar to the door and stood ready. Natalie couldn't help herself. From a small corner of her mind, the only rational place left, Natalie Lambert watched, helpless. Her fangs were down, sharp and occasionally grazing her lips and tongue as she repeatedly moistened them. Natalie knew that if she could look in a mirror, her eyes would be blazing red, making her face seem even more alien than it already was. There was no hope of stopping herself. She was going to kill this man, drink his blood. No amount of willpower, no amount of wishful thinking to the contrary was going to stop her.

Nothing was going to stop her.

Darkness. With the last fading rays of the sun she moved. The door moved easily away from the frame beneath her hands. There was still some light, but the sun had dropped down behind the tall buildings of the city. She knew instinctively that the twilight would not hurt her, that only the direct rays of the sun were deadly. Silently, swiftly she stepped out and turned, concentrating on the sensory presence of the man. It was as if she could almost see him through the building as she stared intently. There was no need to get her bearings. She knew exactly where to go.

The alley was in deep shadow as she moved to stand over him, seeing him for the first time. He was old; perhaps he had lived a long time, or perhaps he had lived too long out on the streets. A black man, with grizzled white hair and beard, his skin dull and gray with filth. He was wearing baggy gray sweatpants covered with various stains and an old red and black plaid shirt. Had he been healthy it would have been a size too small for him. Now Natalie could see it hanging off his pitifully thin frame. He was sound asleep, dead to the world, curled up next to an overloaded shopping cart, curled

around a paper bag with the lip of a bottle peeking out through the opening.

All these details, his face, his clothing, everything, were taken in during that moment of hesitation as she stood over him, preparing to take his life. Bending, she seized him by the right arm and wrenched him to his feet, pinning him against the wall as he cried out. Something shifted unnaturally in his arm and his startled cry turned to a scream which she quickly smothered with her free hand. She'd dislocated his shoulder; she could tell by the bony, obscene distortion of his shoulder beneath the ragged shirt.

She'd fix that for him later, some part of her irrationally assured her.

Holding her hand firmly over his mouth, she spared a brief moment to look at his face. His eyes were wide with fear and pain, and she felt his jaw working beneath her hand, felt his body struggling uselessly against her. The smell of his blood was intoxicating, tangy and heady.

Her hand was a blur as it lifted from his injured arm and ripped at the collar of his shirt, tearing it away to expose his neck and chest. A quick angling of her left wrist and his head was tilted away from her, exposing his throat. Actions her body had never even dreamed of performing were playing out with the ease of someone who had practiced them a thousand times.

With complete abandon she pressed herself tightly against him and placed her lips against his skin. She could feel the blood pounding through the veins, could taste the barest hint of it in the salty silkiness of the skin against her mouth. She could feel his heart beating wildly against her.

It was too much, too much, and she was too *hungry*. Her head tilted back; her fangs ached in her jaw as she opened her mouth wide. Slamming her eyes shut she drew a deep breath and drove her face down into his neck, her fangs tearing unerringly into the vein.

It was almost scalding hot, and each beat of his heart caused more and more of it to flood into her mouth, almost faster than she could pull it into her body. It wasn't possible to compare the richness of this experience with the bottled blood she had been drinking up until this point. There was no way to describe this. He filled her, renewed her, gave her strength.

He gave her life, both figuratively in the form of sustenance and literally as she saw his life play itself out in her mind. Childhood tribulations gave way to teenage trauma and abuse. A woman, a child. Violence. A prison, ugly frightening men and more violence.

The streets. Despair.

With a small sob she pulled away from him, lifted her head, and watched as blood ran down his neck in two small rivers that merged somewhere near his stomach, felt his tears run over the hand she had clamped over his mouth.

The blood. There was more. She had to have it all.

He was silent now, his movements the feeblest of protests against her. She lowered her hand and wrapped her arms around his chest, pulling him closer as she buried her fangs in his neck again. His arms hung limply at his side, her strength supporting him against the wall. His heart was beating sluggishly, erratically now. She had to work harder for his blood. And she did, she pulled hard on the puncture wounds, drawing in smaller and smaller mouthfuls of his blood. Her arms tightened even more around him; she felt ribs resist, then bend, then snap.

She pulled on the vein, on the wounds until his heart gave a series of quick, irregular beats then went still and his body went limp in her arms.

Natalie allowed his dead weight to carry them both to the ground. Unthinking, she rested against his chest, lay there panting, dazed, feeling incredible. Strong, invigorated, powerful.

She wanted to fly. And the best part was, she could.

When at last she opened her eyes, he was looking at her. His eyes were cold and dead and wide open, and they made her insides turn to ice even as his blood flowed through her.

In horror she pushed herself up and away from him, scrambling to kneel several feet from his body. He was still looking at her. On hands and knees she skittered over and closed his eyes, then moved away from him again.

If this had been a body she'd encountered in her old life, one who was the obvious victim of a vampire, she would have immediately begun thinking of ways to hide the truth. She would have come up with a list of likely stories that would have hidden the true nature of the killer. Now *she* was the killer. And worse than that, she'd hurt him, and not really cared that she'd done so.

She had to get out of here, had to get away from him. She couldn't live with this. She couldn't live like this. She had to find someplace exposed where she could wait for the sun...

Natalie rose and whirled away from him, preparing to flee skyward.

And stopped dead in her tracks

The young woman couldn't have been more than sixteen years old, and it was like she appeared out of nowhere. Natalie spent a shocked moment taking in her long dark blond hair and simple cotton dress with a floral print. Except for the heavy, studded combat boots she wore partially laced up on her feet and the cold smile on her face she would have looked the picture of wholesome innocence.

For one horrible moment, Natalie thought she was a mortal.

None of the other vital pieces of information were there, though; no heartbeat, she had a smell of sorts but it was strange and unfamiliar. There were other more obvious clues as well--the pallor of her skin, the silent way she'd slipped up behind her.

Not that she'd been particularly attentive to her surroundings, Natalie thought with a renewed sense of horror. The body of the man she'd killed lay behind her. Just about anyone could have snuck up behind her just a few moments ago and she wouldn't have cared.

Natalie opened her mouth, started to speak, to ask her who she was, but before she could do so, the young woman stepped forward, brushing past her to crouch next to the body.

"Were you just going to leave him here?" she asked, glancing up at her.

"I--I" Natalie stammered, more than a little unprepared for the question.

She shook her head. "Sloppy." She straightened and walked back over to Natalie, taking in her appearance. "They hate sloppy eaters." Natalie stiffened as she demurely lifted the edge of her skirt and pulled out a knife from a sheath fixed to her thigh. As she held it up, light from the street glinted off the blade, and Natalie could clearly make out the serrated edge. Natalie shuddered, wondering if the blade would match a couple of unsolved she had sitting on her desk. "It's too early to take him with

us," she said again moving to crouch beside him. "I usually take them somewhere else. It makes it that much harder for the police." Natalie choked back a gasp of horror as the girl pulled the dead man's head back by the hair to expose the better part of his throat, then made several deep slices with the knife, being particularly careful to place a few ragged cuts over the puncture wounds over on the side.

There wasn't much blood, and she looked up at Natalie appreciatively. "Hungry, were you?" she asked, then casually wiped the blade clean on his sweatpants. "He's dirty enough, so it probably won't matter, but you should drag him back over there." She rose and pointed toward the back of the club with the knife. "Or toss him in the dumpster."

Natalie thought she was going to be sick as she stared at this...child, who looked like she should have just put away her Barbie dolls because she'd decided boys weren't totally gross and disgusting. Instead, Natalie was getting a lecture on the vampire equivalent of littering.

Natalie knew her expression must have been one of wide-eyed horror, and something in the strangers casual demeanor turned cold. "Don't look at me like that," she said, her voice low and dangerous as she quickly sheathed the knife. Then she looked straight into Natalie's eyes. "You killed him, not me."

The words made Natalie go rigid, as she looked past the girl to the now-mutilated corpse. She was right, but Natalie also knew she'd definitely seen this woman's' handiwork before. Not recently, but there were a couple of cases a few months ago. She'd even hypothesized to Nick that it might be a vampire covering his or her tracks with mutilation, and he'd agreed. He'd promised to look into it.

"What's your name?" the girl asked suddenly, breaking into Natalie's reverie. Reflexively, she opened her mouth to give her name, then for some strange reason thought better of it. She needed more information.

After a few moments of silence, she shrugged, then turned and lifted the body with one arm and carried him toward the back door. "Mine's Joanne," she said. "It's OK if you don't want to tell me yours just yet." Then she disappeared into the club with her burden.

Natalie stared after her, seriously tempted to take off, and realized that Joanne was giving her just that opportunity. She had a lot of things to deal with--and what had happened just moments ago, the crime Joanne was even now covering up was at the top of the list. It would be easier to just take off, find some place by herself and wait for the sun. It had been a horrible accident, but one she was certain she could have prevented had she planned better. Now a man was dead by her hand and she knew that she would see his face as it was in his last moments for as long as she lived. It was a terrible cliche, but Natalie also knew it was the truth. She didn't think she could live with it.

And yet she felt like she should, in some odd, terrible way, and she realized she was closer to understanding Nick and his struggle than she ever had before. Maybe this existence was some kind of justice, some kind of apt punishment for horrible sins against humanity.

Now she *knew* she'd been around Nick too long. Was it a sin to seek out food, she asked herself. There'd been a part of her that recognized that she was going to kill this man before she'd committed the act. But during, Natalie hadn't been thinking about maliciously taking a life simply because she could. She'd been *hungry*, nearly starved.

and getting food had been her only thought, her only instinct.

But she was justifying murder and using the food chain to do it. Natalie dropped her head into her hands. She didn't know. She just didn't know what to do. She hadn't meant to kill that man, she hadn't wanted to. But what if it happened again? For it to have happen once was only remotely acceptable given the circumstances. It would be criminal to allow it to happen again.

Before she could reach a decision, Joanne emerged from the club empty handed. "I put him down in the cellar," she said, seemingly satisfied with herself. "Looks like you had quite a party down there today," she added with a grin. "I'd love to see their faces when they show the place to the new owners. Ought to drive the property value way down," Joanne giggled. "Hey," she said, grabbing Natalie's arm suddenly, "you wanna come to a party? Come on," she said, giving Natalie's arm a squeeze before releasing it and shooting up suddenly into the sky.

Surprised, Natalie looked up after her, and saw her leaning over the roof of the club, grinning impishly down at her. "Come on!" she said. Still Natalie hesitated. Her instincts were screaming to stay away from her, but at the same time she was the only vampire she'd encountered since waking up in Nick's loft yesterday. There didn't seem to be too many options, and she might be able to get a few answers out of Joanne if she tagged along.

"Wait," Natalie called up. "I---" Her mind scrambled for a way to stall for a moment. "I just need to run inside for something. Wait for me?"

Joanne nodded. "Hurry, though."

With a quick nod, Natalie ducked back into the club. Digging into her pocket, she quickly pulled out her wallet. She tucked her credit cards and bank cards into her sock and pulled the leg of the sweatpants down over it. The money and ID she tucked into her bra, where she could get at it easily. She'd ditch the wallet later, she decided. It probably wouldn't be a good thing to have it turn up at a murder scene. Natalie wasn't quite sure why she was taking these precautions, but they seemed like a good idea. She was about to follow a strange, and she suspected more than a little unbalanced, vampire to parts unknown. If nothing else, these precautions made her feel like she had some handle on the situation, like she had some measure of control, even if it was mostly an illusion.

Back outside, Natalie was reassured to see Joanne still waiting for her on the roof, and joined her without hesitation. "Where are we going?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Mel's," Joanne answered promptly. "Some friends of mine hang out there." Again she seemed to appraise Natalie. "They probably aren't your type, but I think you'll like them," she added. "Follow me."

And she took off again. Natalie almost lost sight of her, but after a few minutes spotted her several buildings away, waving at her.

There were a lot of people out, walking, driving, hanging around on street corners. Natalie was certain she could hear the heartbeat of every man, woman, child and small furry thing in the city. It made it very difficult to concentrate. At one point, she seriously considered taking out the walkman and using it. But then she caught Joanne looking at her with a knowing expression on her face.

"It gets better," she said sympathetically. "At first, it nearly drove me crazy. You

ever see King Kong'? When they get to the island, and there's all the drums. It's like that, only worse." She shrugged. "I used to hum. All the time, even when I was asleep. Instead of me going crazy, that drove everyone else crazy." She laughed. "You should try it." Then she was gone, and Natalie spent several frantic moments scanning the nearby buildings looking for her until she spotted her again.

It was like that for several blocks, an annoying game of tag of which Natalie was growing increasingly tired. She'd catch up to Joanne, only to have her zip off again, leaving Natalie to take several seconds to get her bearings. Natalie supposed she should be grateful that Joanne always waited for her, always made sure that Natalie could find her before taking off again. But Natalie was in no mood to be charitable.

And it wasn't too long past that that Natalie decided she'd had enough of Joanne's games. They'd been at this game of tag for nearly half an hour, and as far as Natalie could tell, Joanne was leading her around in circles. They were down on Granville, not too far from her office, actually, when Natalie stopped. She just stopped and stood in the middle of the roof and waited, with her arms folded across her chest. If Joanne came back they could have a little chat. If Joanne decided to ditch her and go on to Mel's by herself that was fine. And if the sun came up and found her out there, she was okay with that as well.

Joanne came back, though it took her a good ten minutes. Natalie waited patiently. She even tried humming to herself, and decided it didn't work quite as well as the walkman, but it did help. Finally she felt the air stir nearby, and Joanne was standing next to her. She didn't say anything, just stood regarding Natalie from her perch near the edge, overlooking the street.

Joanne seemed like a kid, Natalie reasoned. But with vampires, as she well knew, it was sometimes hard to tell. Her companion looked like a child, and she certainly acted like one in many respects. But for all Natalie knew, Joanne could be centuries old. Unlikely, but a possibility, one that she needed to keep in mind while dealing with her.

"Joanne," Natalie began, saying her name aloud for the first time. If that *was* her name.

"Hmmmm?" Joanne replied, She'd been standing near the edge, looking down at the pedestrians.

'"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Mel's," Joanne replied, frowning at her and looking at her like she was some kind of idiot.

Natalie closed her eyes. "Yes, I know that. But what is Mel's. Is it a bar? A friend's house?"

"Oh," Joanne said, turning back toward the street. "It's kind of a club. It's kind of hard to explain. You'll see when you get there."

That got her nowhere, Natalie realized. "Where? We've been flying around in circles for no good reason!"

At that Joanne looked almost hurt. "I thought you could use the practice. We're almost there."

"I'd just--" She paused and stepped toward Joanne, trying to control her anger. Getting mad would serve no purpose. "I'd just like to know where I'm going, that's all," she continued in a softer voice.

That seemed to work as she watched understanding flicker across Joanne's face.

"You don't have to be scared," she said with a smile. "I just want you to meet my friends."

She could certainly use a few friends right now, Natalie thought to herself. She was lonely and confused and scared as hell of *everything*. Even being outside and walking around beneath the stars was terrifying. The world had suddenly become horribly unfamiliar and twisted, a world Natalie was certain she had no real place in anymore.

"And," Joanne began, then hesitated. "Well, I was going to say if you needed a place to stay you could always stay with me. I wouldn't mind."

Natalie blinked at her in confusion. "Thank you," she said automatically. "That's very kind of you, but I couldn't impose."

Irritation flashed briefly across Joanne's features. "Like you have somewhere else to go!" she said sharply. "Or did you think you could go back to The Raven?" Joanne began pacing. "What are you going to do for food?" she challenged. "You can't run around killing homeless people every night!"

Natalie looked away quickly, willing herself to remain calm. "That won't be a problem," she said in a low voice.

"Oh yeah? Where you gonna get blood? The way you were chowing down on that guy a few minutes ago it didn't look to me like you had a stash somewhere."

Natalie's face hardened. "It'll never happen again. One way or the other."

She heard Joanne snort in disgust. "Oh, you're one of those," she said sarcastically. Then in a singsong voice, she began dancing around Natalie. "I can't be a killer! I won't take lives. I'll end it all. I'll stay here and wait for the sun." She stopped and glared at Natalie. "Give me a break!"

"Why should you care?" Natalie demanded. "You don't know me."

Joanne walked backwards, away from her, towards the edge of the roof. "I'll be two blocks that way," she said, indicating the direction with a nod of her head. "I'll give you five minutes. Stay or come with. It's up to you."

And she turned and was gone.

Natalie stood for a full minute on the deserted roof hugging herself. Instead of getting answers, some sense of support and help, she was becoming more confused and unsure. Joanne made her too uneasy for Natalie to trust her. Yet she didn't feel like she had much of a choice. The other choice was to stay here and try to make her way alone, but she knew Joanne was right. Where was she going to find blood? She might manage to break into a blood bank or hospital and get herself enough to last a night or two, but without a steady supply Natalie was all too aware of what would happen. Her earlier miscalculation, her mistake of not having an alternative plan had led to a horrible consequence. Natalie did not want to make the same mistake again. Ever.

She needed Joanne badly. Her situation was far too delicate for her to try this on her own. But she needed to be constantly on her guard. Joanne could be leading her into some kind of trap, the purpose of which Natalie couldn't even begin to guess. Or she could just be a lonely young girl looking for a friend. Or at least a dozen other things that her mind conjured up quickly for her, some all right, some ugly, all of them frightening in some way.

Natalie just didn't know. And that was the worst thing of all.

With a sigh, Natalie decided that for now, her best bet was to stick with Joanne.

See what these friends of hers were like.

No sooner had she made the decision and was preparing to take off in the direction Joanne had disappeared in when Joanne appeared beside her, a huge grin on her face.

"I knew you'd come with," she said, squeezing Natalie's hand. "Come on. It isn't far."

Natalie nodded reluctantly, and the two of them took off with Joanne leading the way.

Heading into the seedier part of the city, they finally landed on top of a rather run down townhouse on a secluded street. Natalie hadn't been in this part of town much, except when she had to come down during work. And then she'd always been surrounded by cops. Now, there was just Joanne.

It was fairly quiet, no traffic, but Natalie could hear muffled music and it seemed to be coming from the building upon which they stood.

"This is it," Joanne said. "Everyone's inside, probably downstairs. " At Natalie's puzzled expression she added, "It's an after-hours type club, but I guess you could say this is more like an after-sunset club," as if that explained everything. "Ever been to one of those?"

Natalie shook her head solemnly. In her old life, clubs in general were not the sort of thing she frequented. She'd been lucky to get out to an occasional movie or dinner, but even that had become an increasingly rare occurrence after she'd met Nick.

She closed her eyes, willing the tightness in her throat to go away. "No," she said, but there was a slight tremor in her voice as she spoke, one that was not lost on Joanne who tilted her head and looked at her curiously. She seemed to ponder something for a moment, then turned and led Natalie over to the stairwell door. As the door swung open, the sounds from inside swept over her. There were a lot of people down there, Natalie realized, mortals *and* vampires. Music and alcohol, marijuana and several other substances Natalie was sure she didn't want to identify.

And blood.

It all washed over her, overwhelming her for a second, then Joanne was taking her arm, leading her into the building, down the steps.

Natalie was shocked as she'd looked around, feeling for one disorienting second as if she'd walked into an Escher painting. For as run down and dilapidated as the building looked from the outside, the inside was *beautiful*. They were standing in an open stairwell. Most of the walls and portions of the floors had been removed, giving the center of the building a very open, airy feel to it. The oak steps that they were standing on now led down for several floors, finally disappearing into the ground floor many yards below. Along the way were several balconies and alcoves, not all of them obviously accessible in any way that Natalie could see. Some looked like precarious platforms protruding perpendicular from the wall. A ladder leaned conspicuously against a bare, far wall and Natalie realized that was for the mortal visitors, knowledgeable and otherwise. The vampires, obviously would have no need of it.

Couches, armchairs, futons, lamps, shelves of books and several sprawled bodies populated a couple of the odd rooms. Some of the alcoves were completely bare, or had a single painting hanging in them. Natalie stared about her in amazement, wondering about the physics of this, how someone could have designed all this to be stable and

safe.

"Neat, huh?" Joanne said, looking back over her shoulder at her with a grin. "I told you you'd like this place."

She led Natalie down the winding staircase which took up one whole corner of the building. They turned and passed through a small hallway and stood before a closed door. It was all red--the door, the walls, the floor--everything. It was illuminated by a single, dim light fixture. The visual was particularly obvious; all that seemed to be missing was a mural of lips and fangs on the door, wide open and inviting, Natalie thought with more than a little distaste.

The music was even louder down here, and Natalie thought it sounded like a live band of some sort. Not quite heavy metal (thankfully), but close. It sounded like one of the local alternative bands that had recently struck it big, Natalie decided. Obviously with a little help from a benefactor of some sort. Though the door was still closed, Natalie could almost feel the press of mortal bodies, and unconsciously licked her lips.

The door opened. As it had up on the roof, sound and smells assaulted her, though which much more force this time. Had she been mortal, the heat pouring out of the underground club would have been almost unbearable, but Natalie discovered that it didn't seem to bother her that much as she followed Joanne into the room.

There was a bouncer. Of course there was a bouncer. Natalie didn't pay much attention to him, other than to glance at his large, handsome features as he grinned and hugged Joanne then waved them through. She was too busy dealing with the smell of all the blood. The music thankfully drowned out the sound of the heartbeats, the sound of blood.

But something was wrong. They'd moved a few feet into the club and were standing on the edge of the crowd, near a bar. Natalie began to feel a now familiar ache in her upper gums. Her fangs had emerged! With horror, Natalie tried to will them away, clamped her lips tightly together to hide them. Someone might see. How could this be? She'd fed not that long ago. *Why* was she so hungry now? Was it all the flying?

A body abruptly brushed past her, lingering for a second too long. It was enough to short circuit her attempts to conceal herself. She turned and moved after him, heard herself hiss as her arm reached out. She almost had him.

But someone else was faster, someone huge and strong and angry judging from the rough way he handled her. Before her hand made contact with the kid, who remained thankfully oblivious to the activity and just kept working his way to the bar, Natalie was grabbed tightly from behind, one hand on her outstretched arm, the other clamped down tightly on her shoulder, and she was half dragged across the floor toward a doorway set in the wall of the club, near the stage. Natalie didn't care; she hadn't even been aware of being hungry. She was becoming used to it being there, she thought dimly, getting so used to it that she didn't pay that much attention to it, didn't monitor it.

She struggled with him, snarling, and tried to bite his arm. That's when another pair of hands joined the first, and before she could continue her protest, she found herself in a much quieter and less crowded room, pinned roughly against a wall by a pair of meaty hands. Something cold and hard was shoved against her lips. Instinctively, she turned her head away, but a hand tangled itself tightly in her hair and pulled. The glass was again forced into her mouth, and Natalie realized it was blood. Someone was giving her blood.

Then they didn't need to hold her anymore. She stopped struggling and was gulping at the bottle which was tilted against her mouth, heedless of it dribbling down her face and chin. When they released her, she immediately grasped the bottle, tilting it higher and pouring the blood into her mouth. When that was gone, another one was shoved into her hands, and the empty one quietly removed.

When she'd finished with the second bottle, Natalie realized that Joanne was in the room with them, as was the bouncer. He must have been the one who grabbed her. She wanted to thank him, but given the way the fourth occupant of the room was glaring at all three of them, Natalie decided it might be wiser to keep quiet for the time being. Instead, she looked at the woman and decided, given her demeanor and the way both Joanne and the bouncer were apologizing, that this might be Mel.

She was a vampire, as was the bouncer; Natalie realized that immediately. She was older than Joanne, at least physically. Natalie guessed maybe thirty, thirty-five. She had a round face, deep blue eyes, stood about medium height. Her features were rather plain, as was her attire, simple black silk pants and blouse, but there was an air of casual elegance about her. She probably rolled out of bed looking beautiful, Natalie thought. She certainly felt more than a little shabby and worse for wear in her presence, not unlike the way she used to feel around Janette.

The bouncer, whom Joanne had called Dave, was trying unsuccessfully to explain why he'd let them in, as the woman filled a glass of blood and silently handed it to her without looking in her direction. Natalie took it and forced herself to sip, though the temptation to gulp it down was still there, still strong.

"All right, all right," the woman said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "We'll discuss this later. We'll need to come up with a new job for you," she added. "You can go. Send Boris down. He's going to take your place." Natalie looked over the top of her glass at Dave, expecting an argument. To her surprise he was silent. But as he turned to go, Natalie saw a look of intense hatred flash across his features, directed first at the woman who had turned to Joanne, and then quickly at her. He made no attempt to hide it. Then he was gone.

"I'm sorry," Joanne said. Natalie almost had to laugh at how utterly insincere she sounded, but quickly bit her tongue. Another thought occurred to her as well, and it sent a chill rushing through her. Joanne had done this on purpose, knowing that it might have ended in disaster.

"No you're not," the woman replied, her voice clipped with anger. "And I think you know how *stupid* and dangerous this was," she added, with a wave of her hand in Natalie's direction. "You should have checked with me first."

Joanne glanced over at her. "Can she stay?" Natalie suddenly felt like some stray puppy who'd been picked up off the street.

"Go on," the woman said, pointing Joanne toward the door. "I want to talk to her for a few minutes, and we'll see."

"I'd rather stay," Joanne said suddenly, moving to hover protectively next to Natalie. "I found her. I should stay."

"I'll deal with you later," she said firmly, pointing toward the door again. With a sigh, Joanne turned quickly to Natalie. "I'll be outside. It'll be all right. Don't be scared." Reluctantly she moved to the door.

"Now," she said, addressing Natalie for the first time. "What's your name?"

Again, Natalie had that strange feeling that she should be careful, that she needed to keep information about herself close. Briefly, she considered lying, giving her a fake name.

"She doesn't talk much," Joanne said from the doorway. "She's barely said a word since I found her."

"Joanne," the woman said, obviously getting annoyed.

"I found her over at The Raven," Joanne added quickly. Natalie watched as the woman's eyes narrowed suspiciously at that. "She'd just killed a homeless guy. But don't worry. I took care of it."

"Do you want me to call Boris?" the woman asked in a calm voice, her gaze never leaving Natalie.

At that, Joanne left without another word, quietly closing the door behind her.

"Now, what did you say your name was?" the woman asked, leading them both over to a small sofa in the corner.

"I--I didn't," Natalie replied, hating the tentative way her voice sounded. Would she ever get past this, past being afraid of everyone and everything?

She reached over and took the now-empty glass from Natalie's hand and silently refilled it. "Well, I'm Sarah," she said. Natalie frowned at that, wondering who in the world Mel was. "What?" Sarah asked.

Natalie shook her head quickly. "Nothing," she said.

Sarah seemed to accept that as she filled her own glass. "I take it you need a place to stay," she said matter-of-factly, filling her own glass. When she didn't answer, Sarah looked over at her with a small frown. "You're welcome to stay here, at least for tonight. In fact, I insist on it."

"I can take care of myself," she blurted out. It was a lie, a complete and total lie. And given the skeptical expression on Sarah's face, she recognized it for the lie it was as well.

"Joanne mentioned that you killed someone earlier," Sarah said after a pause instead of arguing directly with her. When Natalie averted her eyes, and stared intently at the floor, she continued. "It happens. For us, it's necessary sometimes. I doubt anyone will condemn you for it, especially since Joanne took care of it." At Sarah's light touch on her arm, Natalie looked up, and found herself pinned by Sarah's eyes. "But I won't tolerate too much of that in my city," Sarah said. "And neither will the Enforcers."

"The Enforcers?" Natalie asked before she could stop herself. She had an idea of what Sarah was talking about. Although Nick had never told her anything outright, she'd surmised early on that vampires must have some sort of internal police force, one devoted to maintaining their secret. Sarah had just confirmed this. But Sarah's reference to Toronto as "my city" disturbed her--three days ago it had clearly belonged to LaCroix.

But Sarah also suddenly decided not to be too forthcoming. "Just do exactly what I tell you and they won't bother you. And remember what almost happened earlier." She took a long sip of her own drink.

Natalie cleared her throat. "I'm sorry about that," she said sincerely. "I don't know what happened."

Sarah nodded. "It won't happen again," she said. "Any incidents, and you won't be welcome here. I don't keep a low profile, as you can see for yourself, but I do try to

keep people from becoming suspicious."

Natalie dropped her eyes, examining the liquid in her glass. "I'd like to be able to promise that nothing will happen, but..." she allowed her voice to trail off as she looked up.

"It's to be expected," she replied. "Judging from things, I'd say you're very new, maybe only a couple of days old. *That's* why you need to stay here, at least for a little while. I'll keep an eye on you."

Sarah was doing all the right things. There was sympathy and understanding in her expression, her words were meant to be reassuring, Natalie knew. And yet, something about the demeanor of the other woman bothered her. It could just be her own fears and suspicions and insecurities speaking. It was certainly understandable, given everything she'd been through in the past day and a half, having been thrust into a strange and disorienting and violent world that she was unequipped to deal with. But it was also the fact that if she stayed here, Sarah would be watching her, and Natalie guessed that very little escaped her notice. She wasn't sure she was comfortable with that, but she acknowledged that this woman had every right to dictate the rules of her own house.

"Joanne won't be needing her room tonight, so you can sleep there. I'll make sure there's plenty for you to drink." As she spoke, Sarah went to the door and waved to someone. Almost immediately, a slim young man with long dark hair appeared. Natalie also caught a glimpse of Joanne hovering near the doorway, dancing with another woman. The newcomer fixed her with a curious stare as the door closed behind him, but caught himself and turned to Sarah's expectantly. "She's going to be staying with us, at least for tonight, Put her in Joanne's room," Sarah said, addressing him.

Sarah returned and sat down next to Natalie, casually reaching over to finger the sleeve of Natalie's coat, running the tips of her fingers across the material. "We should get you something better to wear," she said after a moment, and Natalie knew she'd noted every speck of dust and spot of blood on her clothes. "And cleaned up. We'll talk some more tomorrow. There are some rules of the house that you'll need to understand if you're going to stay." She paused and searched Natalie's eyes for a moment. "But that can wait until tomorrow."

Rising abruptly, Sarah walked over to the young man. "This is Jose," she said placing her hand on his shoulder. "He'll show you around, get you whatever you need." At the door, Sarah turned back. "Jose?" she said. When he looked up at her, she continued. "No mortals here today, all right." She looked pointedly at Natalie, which made her feel very uncomfortable, almost ashamed, because she knew exactly why the order was being issued. "Make sure everyone knows."

"I will," Jose assured her. After the door closed behind Sarah, Jose turned and smiled at her. "I'm sorry," he said. "Joanne didn't tell me your name." Studying his features, Natalie decided she liked the look of him.. She liked the kindness in his eyes, the gentleness in the way he moved.

"You can...call me Natasha," she said reluctantly after a few minutes. It wasn't a lie, exactly; it was her name, sort of, though Natalie had no idea why she quickly threw out that name and not her own. But she decided for the time being, she'd continue on instinct, and instinct was telling her to remain as anonymous as possible for just a bit longer.

"Natasha," he said, nodding, though she saw one eyebrow quirk quickly and wondered if he already knew, if she was making a fool out of herself.. "Pleased to meet you," he said smoothly, extending his hand, which she clasped. Maybe she'd been imagining things a moment before; it wasn't like *everyone* in the city, vampire or otherwise, would know her on sight. He had a firm grip. but soft hands, and when he squeezed her fingers reassuringly Natalie found that it worked. She'd started to relax as soon as Sarah had left her alone with him. But Natalie made a quick mental note not too let her guard down too much or too quickly. Disaster had very nearly struck earlier when she'd not been paying attention. It was another mistake she didn't want to repeat if she could possibly avoid it.

He was talking again. "I think some of Jenny's things will fit you," he said. "She's out of town for a few weeks, but I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you borrowed something to sleep in and a change of clothes. When you're ready, I'll show you where you can clean up and where you'll sleep."

"Thank you," Natalie said. She wanted to ask him why Joanne wouldn't be needing her room, but couldn't bring herself to do so. Instead, she quickly downed the rest of the contents of her glass and rose. "I'm ready now," she said.

Jose nodded. "Then follow me," he said.

When they stepped out into the heat and noise of the club, Jose reached over and grabbed her hand, a simple gesture that he seemed to give no thought to. But Natalie found it gave her courage. It gave her something to focus on so she could hold the noise and confusion at bay to a small extent. As he led her through the club, Natalie took a moment to glance around. She spotted Sarah talking with someone in the corner, then did a double take when she recognized the man Sarah was with. He'd just been elected to the city council and given that he was hanging out here, Natalie realized the municipal gossip she'd heard about his playboy ways was absolutely true. Joanne was nowhere to be seen, and Natalie wondered where on earth she was. Earlier the girl seemed quite intent on hovering protectively over her, and Natalie thought it odd that she'd suddenly disappear without a trace.

Out in the little red hallway they passed several people heading into the club. There were several mortal young women and another female vampire. The mortals were all young, definitely underage, wearing too much perfume and makeup. Natalie could feel the heat from their bodies and was glad Sarah had just given her so much blood just a short while ago. Even so, Natalie found them nearly irresistible. Jose must have sensed it as well, because his fingers tightened on hers and he stepped up his pace ever so slightly. To distract herself, Natalie glanced at the vampire who was with the mortals. She wasn't positive, but she thought she might have seen this one at The Raven once or twice.

They went up a short flight of stairs, and toward a small room on the main level, just above the club. This floor was all hardwood, and fairly barren, though there was a small clump of couches and chairs in one corner. Natalie also spotted a front entrance, several doors and curtained alcove. Now that it was a little later in the evening, another bouncer had taken up position at the front door. Screens had been set up to keep people from wandering around the main house without permission. They'd have to go directly past the guy keeping watch at the front in order see anything..

Jose led her over to one of the curtained alcoves and swept aside the heavy green

drape. Natalie peered in around him. It was really nothing more than a cubbyhole and was bare, except for a mattress and a large wardrobe.

"This is where you'll sleep," he said. "The bathroom," he said, releasing the curtain and walking several feet over to a black door, "is right here. It's the private bath," he added, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a key, unlocking the door. "Towels are there in the cupboard. Feel free to take a shower."

Natalie trailed after him silently, taking in everything he said, but feeling oddly disconnected. Even though she was in a strange house, she wanted nothing more than to take a long, hot shower and crawl into bed. Maybe when she woke up she'd discover that this had all been some horrible nightmare.

Jose ushered her back into the cubbyhole, telling her he'd be back in a few minutes. Natalie sat down on the mattress and ran a hand through her hair. She didn't want to be here. But there was no place else to go. Without The Raven, *this* was the only safe place for the time being. Natalie dropped her head into her hands and took several deep breaths. She felt numb, dead inside. Last night she'd been able to use this feeling to her advantage so that she could get things done. Now, there wasn't much she could do except sit here and wait for Jose.

When he returned after ten minutes or so, his arms were laden with a red silk nightgown, a change of clothes for tomorrow, and several bottles of blood. Natalie automatically rose when he entered and took one of the bottles from him. As he carefully lined the rest of them up next to the bed, she opened it and took several long swallows.

"It gets better," he said, sympathetically, watching her intently as she drained half the bottle without pausing.

"Everyone keeps saying that," Natalie replied with more than a little bitterness in her voice as she wiped her lips with her hand. "I killed someone earlier tonight. Tell him that." She wanted Jose to just leave her alone, to think, or cry, or whatever the hell she felt like doing.

Jose patted her arm reassuringly. "Do you need anything else?" he asked, dropping the subject. "A book? Anything? Just ask." When Natalie glanced up at him she was slightly taken aback by his earnest expression, and realized he absolutely meant it--all she need to do was ask and he'd make every attempt to get what she wanted or needed. She wasn't sure how to respond to it; it was something she was familiar with, but not as the recipient..

Somehow Natalie managed a smile for his benefit. "I'll be fine." Then she paused and added ruefully, "At least for the time being. I don't want to keep you."

He nodded. "You should try to get some rest, but I'm afraid until the club shuts down it's going to be pretty noisy. Nobody'll bother you in here, though," he said, turning to go.

"Thank you," Natalie said sincerely, picking up the nightgown and clutching it to her chest.. "Thank you very much."

He nodded, his lips curving into a small smile. "I'm three floors up, near the stairs. Come get me if you need anything."

"I will," Natalie promised.

With a final nod, Jose was gone, leaving her standing alone in the room. With a sigh of relief over having some small measure of privacy at last, Natalie dropped the

nightgown to the mattress and untied the sash of the coat. Shrugging it off she was about to hang it on the hook in the wardrobe when she noticed that it was lighter than it should have been. Frantically she passed her hands over the folds of the coat, then drew them away slowly.

Her wallet was missing.

So were her keys. Natalie was now doubly glad she'd emptied it out back at The Raven, but she was still disturbed that it was missing. Granted, it was very possible she'd dropped it while chasing Joanne around the rooftops of Toronto. She paused a moment and reviewed that moment back in the club, when she'd gone after that boy. But it was no use; she couldn't recall if anyone had surreptitiously searched her pockets or not.

Bending down, she quickly made sure all her credit and bank cards were still in her sock. They were, along with her drivers license and some other pieces of ID. Her cash was still tucked in the front of her bra. She could feel it crackling against her skin.

So, whoever had taken the wallet wasn't going to learn anything about her from it. And Natalie was certain that's what this was about. The keys weren't that big of a deal either, she decided. They were for her car and her apartment. Assuming they could figure out who she was--if they hadn't done so already--little things like locks and doors weren't going to stop them from gaining access if they wanted it.

Sitting on the bed, she considered this new wrinkle. She hadn't exactly been forthcoming with information about herself to *anyone* she'd encountered, even Jose whom she so far trusted more than anyone in this place. And she'd nearly attacked someone in Sarah's club. If she were in the other woman's shoes, she'd feel perfectly justified in doing a little checking.

But why not ask or demand some answers to questions? Why use this method of getting it from her?

For a moment, Natalie seriously considered packing up and leaving. Jose had brought her four bottles of blood, one of which she was halfway through. She could take them with her, find some place else to stay.

Be realistic, Natalie admonished herself. Four bottles--three and a half really since she was already working on one of them--weren't going to last her that long. Then what? She'd be right back where she'd started from: an abandoned, starving newborn vampire struggling for survival. It was the same situation that had led her to follow Joanne here in the first place. If she left now she'd find herself holed up someplace all day tomorrow just like she'd done today. And she already knew what the outcome of that would be.

That *must* be avoided at all costs, Natalie decided, even if it meant staying here, among all these strangers and dangerous people whom she didn't trust. When she looked at it closely, she was, in a sense, trapped by circumstance. Wasn't *that* the story of her life--at least her life as it had been over the last few years. She *had* to stay.

Because they had answers, even if they weren't forthcoming with them.

Because they had blood.

The decision made, Natalie snatched up the nightgown Jose had brought for her, the one belonging to Jenny. It was totally not her, Natalie decided, holding it up and getting a good look at it for the first time. It was even more inappropriate than the black teddy Grace and the others had bought her a couple of years ago for her birthday.

Jose hadn't brought her a robe, she realized looking around to distract herself. Those memories were associated with yet another painful episode in her life. Her old life. The coat would have to do, she decided, grabbing it from off the hook she'd just hung it on and throwing it over her arm. Cautiously she slipped through the curtain that covered the door and looked around. A couple of people were having a very heated discussion over near the couches, and she could hear other voices as well as other activities all around her, coming from the upper levels of the house. Interwoven through all of that was the sound of the club below. The guy at the door was sitting in a wooden chair looking thoroughly bored. He watched her as she made her way to the bathroom.

The bathroom was spare in terms of fixtures, simple black and white, but it did have all the essentials. Natalie stopped for a moment and looked at the toilet. Now *that* was something she'd never discussed with Nick, and somehow she couldn't see herself asking Sarah or Jose about this aspect of vampire life. She certainly hadn't since waking up yesterday.

It was their incredibly efficient metabolism she decided. She'd actually realized that was the case when she'd first started studying Nick. The rapid healing, the steady state maintenance of his body so that he never aged. A vampire's system must use practically every scrap of material in the blood and use it efficiently, by and large eliminating waste. Experiencing it first hand certainly drove the point home, she thought. The sheer volume of nutrients needed to maintain a vampire, at least a new one, was staggering. Nick hadn't seemed to required quite so much blood, though she was now beginning to question that assumption. At the very least she was beginning to realize what exquisite control he had.

Had, that was the operative word, wasn't it, she thought bitterly. Exquisite control except at that last, most crucial moment. Natalie felt a wave of anger wash through her at the thought--that when the stakes were supposedly the highest, when he should have fought the hardest for control, he'd given in, hadn't been able to stop...

Just as the anger reached its peak and threatened to overwhelm her, she glanced up. Her reflection in the mirror over the sink looked back at her. Her eyes were gold, probably from the anger. Natalie stepped closer and looked long and hard. She'd seen the metamorphosis in Nick, and had been simultaneously frightened and fascinated by it. But looking at it on her face, knowing that it was a part of her now, that it would always be there...

She swallowed, feeling the anger drain away. She watched entranced as the gold slowly gave way to the normal color of her eyes. In a minute, there was no trace of gold at all.

Staring at her reflection for a few moments longer, she finally turned away with a sigh. Natalie walked over and twisted the lock on the bathroom door, trying not to think about what she'd just witnessed. Trying not to think at all. A lock certainly wouldn't keep out any vampires who wanted access, but at least she'd have some warning. And it would keep anyone else from walking in on her unannounced while she bathed.

Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, she pulled off the huge sneakers and the sweatsocks, tossing them into the corner. The oversized purple t-shirt, which was now covered with at least three separate sets of bloodstains, followed, as did the sweatpants. She'd have to go out tomorrow night and buy herself some new clothes. These would have to be thrown away.

"Well this is interesting," she said aloud, looking down at her body. Why she hadn't noticed *this* particular change was beyond her, but it did explain why she'd never seen an overweight vampire before. Natalie was actually quite pleased with this new revelation, the first she'd been honestly pleased with since this whole nightmare had started. All the extra pounds she'd gained in the last couple of months were gone, melted away as if they'd never existed. Her waist was as trim as it had been when she'd started medical school, as were her thighs.

She'd let herself go in the last couple of months. She'd started out knowing it, had not bothered to pay attention somewhere in the middle, and had ended up not caring. It wasn't like there was anyone who was actually going to see her, and she'd kept telling herself that if that actually did happen it wouldn't, shouldn't matter in the long run anyway.

"Too bad I can't market this," she said to her reflection again. Silly idea, really. So far this was the only *good* thing that had happened to her in a long time, and she was including the last several years with Nick in that time estimate. And of course the other side effects were deadly, not to her personally, but to a lot of other innocent people.

There were several bottles of shampoo and soap in the shower, and Natalie hoped they didn't belong to anyone in particular since she didn't have any of her own. Turning the water on full, she let it run for a few minutes while she opened the cupboards and pulled out two large towels and a washcloth. Then she stepped under the stream of hot water.

It was amazing, the restorative powers of a shower, she thought. As she stood under the spray and washed a day and a half worth of the worst parts of both the city and herself off, she began to feel a little more at ease. This was the first *normal* thing she'd done since yesterday. She was taking a simple shower, something she did every day of her old life.

She scrubbed herself. She washed her face and neck and arms where there had been blood. She rinsed away the grime on her hands and legs that had resulted from her flying lessons. Her hair was the worst. It was always a production to wash it because there was so much of it, but it was absolutely necessary in this case. She could feel clumps of it stiffened with blood and dirt.

After a long time under the spray, when she finally felt clean, she stepped out and wrapped herself in one of the large towels she'd pulled out of the cupboard, amused to note that the skin at the tips of her fingers hadn't puckered or wrinkled from standing in the water too long. Another uselessly noted fact of being a vampire, Natalie decided, though she realized she needed to start paying better attention to these things, useless or not. You never knew when one of those useless facts might become crucial.

Yes, the nightgown was completely inappropriate, and Natalie felt more than a little uncomfortable in it, even though it fit quite well. She'd never have dared to wear something like this before, she thought. Shrugging into the coat again, she gathered her dirty clothes up into a bundle and ducked out of the bathroom. The bored bouncer was still there, and watched her absently as she walked barefoot across the hardwood floor and slipped quickly into the cubbyhole.

There, she carefully began folding her old clothes, then paused as she held the shirt. After a moment of hesitation, she ripped a small piece of it near the bottom hem. She held it up in her hand, rubbing the fabric against her fingers, then slowly lifted it to

her face. Everything she'd been through in this shirt was there. She could smell it. But so was his scent, the combination of aftershave and that awful, tacky cologne he'd started wearing. Natalie was certain Schanke had given it to him, but hadn't noticed it on him until after the plane crash. Far beneath that she could faintly smell the detergent used to wash the garment, and beyond that the smell of the caddie, of The Raven before it had been abandoned, of blood. She thought about how the olfactory system was tied intimately with the limbic system, which many believed regulated affect. Sitting here with the scents of Nick's whole life on this little piece of cloth, given all the things she was now feeling, Natalie could well believe that that was also true for vampires, though she had no real idea if vampires had a limbic system or not. Somehow, though, this seemingly odd similarity made her feel less out of place in the world, if only for a moment.

Someone had made up the bed while she'd showered, putting fresh sheets and a comforter on it. Natalie guessed Jose had ducked down here while she'd been showering and done up the room. She'd have to remember to thank him tomorrow for trying to make her feel more comfortable. Again, she wondered where Joanne was. She hadn't seen her since that glimpse of her on the dance floor. Even though it was obvious that Joanne could take care of herself, sort of, Natalie was concerned none the less.

And that scene earlier down in the club made her wonder. If it wasn't for the missing wallet, Natalie thought Joanne might simply be acting out. It reinforced the idea that she was very young, but what a dangerous way to get attention. However, since she was slowly becoming convinced that her wallet and keys had been lifted during that encounter, maybe it was some well-practiced drill designed to fulfill a lot of purposes. Now that Joanne had fulfilled her role, had she been sent off to stand guard, looking for others like her? And if that was the case what about Jose, or Sarah herself?

With a sigh, Natalie finished folding her clothes and placed them in a neat pile in the corner of the room, near the wardrobe. She took her cards and money, and the small scrap of cloth and tucked them under the pillow, then climbed in beneath the sheets and comforter. They were cool and soft and clean, Natalie felt the familiar easing of tensed muscles in her upper back and wondered if vampires had phantom pains, old somatic ghosts of their former lives until they'd spent enough time as a vampire to forget their mortal lives, their mortal responses. Clean and warm and dry, though certainly not safe, Natalie tried to relax and allowed her mind to wander.

When Nick had told her that an eternity of darkness was worse than death, she'd replied that an eternity of regret had to be just as bad. Laura's suicide had suddenly made her feel as though she didn't fit in her life anymore, that there were huge pieces missing. She'd turned to Nick in an attempt to fill that void, to give her life some validation, make it less empty.

Now there wasn't anything she wouldn't give to have that old life back, as dissatisfying as it had become. She'd take the loneliness, the job she was rapidly burning out on, the sad and angry and frustrating pseudo-relationship with Nick. All of it, and she'd wake up every day and thank God for giving it to her.

But this was her life now, the only one she had, at least for as long as she wanted to keep it. She'd told Nick that maybe Laura had the right idea. She hadn't really meant it; Laura's suicide had torn down a lot of well-constructed walls, put more than a few chinks in her formidable armor. But suicide wasn't a path she wanted to take. When

she'd talked about it to Nick it was more an attempt to understand, to try to see into the place where Laura had been. Maybe then it would've all make sense.

But the timing had been bad. Between her crisis and Tracy Vetter's death, she knew that now. But she'd needed...something. Needed it more than she'd ever needed anything in her life even if she hadn't been able to put her finger on exactly what it was. Maybe it was just simple closeness, feeling loved, feeling as though she had a significant place in someone's life, in Nick's life. That there was hope for the future, that there was a *reason* to have hope for the future.

She was exhausted. She'd often seen Nick looking worn and weary, and given the physical and emotional toll on her in the last few days, she could well understand the fatigue etched on his face. He had eight centuries worth of this to deal with. What were two days compared to that?

But of course sleep wouldn't come. Part of it was the noise. She curled up on her side, resisting the urge to form a tight, fetal ball, and listened for a moment to the sounds of the club. It wasn't that late, really. Technically, it was like she was going to bed at noon, but she didn't feel like dealing with anyone. Ironic that--she'd spent yesterday planning her escape from Nick's loft and her trip to The Raven in the hopes of finding someone. Now that she had, all she wanted was to be alone.

The party was still going strong, and the whole house was filled with the sound of many heartbeats. She felt hungry again--when *didn't* she feel hungry anymore?--and reached out in the dark to pick up the opened bottle sitting next to the bed. She finished it in several long, careful sips; the last thing she wanted was blood in her bed.

It had only been hours since she'd killed that man. It felt like a lifetime. She wished it *was* a lifetime, that she had at least the cushion of time to ease the pain and horror of it. If she closed her eyes she could see his face, and with every sip of blood that she took from a bottle, she thought about how different it was from the hot blood spurting into her mouth straight from the vein. How that had been so much better. She didn't even know his name. Having seen his whole life in his blood, Natalie felt the unjustness of this down to her bones. And she promised herself that she would always remember him as a *life*, one that she had stolen when she had no right to do so.

She was shaking now, her fingers clutching at the comforter. It wasn't because she was cold, she knew.

When she got the news that her grandmother had died, she'd sat there and listened to Richard tell her over the phone, wondering what she was going to do about the test she had to take the next day. Then she'd started shaking, for no good reason. She laid in bed that night and shook. When she woke up the next morning she'd still been shaking. She'd felt as though she hadn't gotten a bit of rest during the night. It was like that now--another phantom mortal response she supposed. Some sort of delayed stress reaction.

Natalie laid there in the dark, shaking and sipping occasionally from one of the bottles of blood near the bed, and began to plan. It was better than sitting there thinking through all the things she could have done differently. What was done was done, and she would have to work at finding some way to live with them.

And she wanted to live, she realized. She didn't know exactly when the decision had been made, but now that it had she hoped there would be no second thoughts. Or any reasons for second thoughts.

They were probably looking for her. The thought struck her then; her picture

might have been on the news. If anyone here watched the news, or paid attention to the police bands, they'd probably figure out who she was, if they hadn't already done so. Natalie figured she'd find out more about that tomorrow, one way or another. She had some money in the bank. Not a lot, but she'd get as much of it out as possible tomorrow night. That and cash advances on her credit cards. The authorities would know, then, that she was still in Toronto, but she'd have to live with that. She'd need clothes, things that weren't her usual style: jeans, hats, things like that

And then she needed to get out of Toronto. She couldn't stay here, she realized that now, and wondered if Sarah would help her leave the city. Or maybe Jose. Unless she could come up with some kind of disguise that she could realistically pull off *and* travel at night, public transportation was out. Natalie supposed she could make her way out of the city on foot and by air, but she'd definitely be in trouble when the sun came up. Nick had once mentioned something about an expert who helped people disappear. At first she thought he'd been referring to himself, but apparently the vampire community had some kind of relocation service. What would be the price for that sort of thing, she wondered.

And Natalie wasn't entirely certain they'd let her leave--with good reason, she had to admit, given what had happened earlier, both outside The Raven and here. Until she reached the point everyone kept promising and things got better, she was too dangerous to release unsupervised on an unsuspecting city. This, above everything else, she had to always keep in mind; always remember when she considered what plan of action she was going to engage in at any given point.

And once all this stuff was achieved, she'd start to look for Nick. He had to be out there somewhere, running, trying to put the past behind him yet again. Could she sense his presence, she asked herself, like she'd sensed the rising and setting of the sun at The Raven? Nick hadn't talked much about his relationship with LaCroix to her; oftentimes she got the sense that there were *volumes* he wasn't telling her. And then there were other times when he got that strange faraway look on his face. Some of those were bad memories, she knew, but other times it almost seemed to her as if he were listening to someone, or sensing some kind of vibration she couldn't feel.

Where was he? Where had he gone after he'd left her in the loft? It had only been three nights; there was a chance he'd gone far, but somehow Natalie didn't think so. He wasn't near, in Toronto, but he wasn't on the other side of the world either. Of that she was certain.

Was this part of it then? Was the link that bound a fledgling to his or her...master, did it involve some knowledge of proximity?

Her mind had hesitated over that term, and she took a minute to consider it. Master. She had never liked the implications of that. Like a father, or a brother Nick had told her once, speaking of LaCroix. Nick was her master now--technically at least. Though in her mind, that was a title in name only. Even if he'd stayed around, she was not about to acknowledge him as her master. Teacher, yes, but that would be about as far as she would be willing to go on that particular score.

She didn't have the faintest idea how to do this, how to cast her mind out across a thread that might or might not exist, to draw his attention to her. But she'd been able to sense the rising and setting of the sun. Sunset and sunrise were both physical events; she could pinpoint them in time. The only thing she had to on here was the sense of

proximity, her certain knowledge that Nick was not somewhere off in China or Russia, but still within some reasonably accessible geographic location.

Making a concerted effort to relax, Natalie focused on that tenuous sense of distance and hoped it would lead her to some sense of him. As she did so she finally realized that she needed some brief, distal contact with him more to assure herself that he was still alive, that he was still out there somewhere more so than she needed to draw his attention to her. It was strange; it should be just the opposite, but Natalie was fairly certain she would be satisfied in just knowing that he still existed, as desperate as her situation was at the moment. If he was still alive, the rest would fall into place eventually, even if she had to struggle to make it so

For what seemed like hours, she searched, or tried to, imagined casting her mind out over the city, across great distances. But if there was anything, any tiny scrap of him in her mind, Natalie couldn't find it. And if she did, she realized, it would not necessarily be the case that she would be able to recognize it for what it was. Maybe it was one of those things that required training. She pictured Nick wandering through a dark, ancient maze looking for LaCroix, plaintively asking why he'd been left, and LaCroix assuring him he was still there and to seek him out. But she allowed herself to take hope in the fact that perhaps her efforts were not in vain. If she accomplished nothing else, she might have somehow made him aware that she still existed, that she still lived, and that he would come and find her.

It was a fairy tale, of course, the type of which she rarely allowed herself to indulge in. But there were just times, particularly times where Nick was concerned, that she just couldn't help herself.

In the darkness, she smiled.

The building was beginning to quiet down. Natalie listened as the heartbeats diminished, thinned out, became one or two hold-outs who foolishly refused to go home. Finally, after a very long time, it was quiet. Not still; she could quite clearly hear the stirrings of several occupants, those without seventy-plus heartbeats a minute. But quiet in the sense that there were no mortal lives in close proximity. Then she heard footsteps, a light tread, slow and measured. They moved quietly across the hardwood floor of the main level, moved toward the room in which she lay.

She went absolutely still, feigned sleep and sensed the curtain being moved aside. She didn't need to open her eyes to know it was Sarah who stood in the doorway, who watched for several moments in contemplative silence. Natalie wasn't sure if Sarah knew she was faking it or not, or if she did know whether the other woman even cared. For several long moments she felt Sarah's eyes on her, taking in every detail, could feel the soft ambient light spilling into the cubicle. She didn't want to think about what kind of expression she might see on Sarah's face if she were to open her eyes just then. Something ugly, something cold and calculating and dispassionate, she was sure.

In the dark, Natalie tried not to shiver. And when at last she felt a faint breeze, when Sarah allowed the curtain to finally fall back into place and withdrew from the room, Natalie breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Sleep did not come for a long time after that, but when it did, sometime toward noon, she dreamed of Nick.

Then black despair,
The shadow of a starless night, was thrown
Over the world in which I moved alone.
--Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Third night...

She was running in a maze of blank stone corridors lit by candlelight. She was lost. In the distance, she heard a voice, a man's voice vaguely familiar, a comforting lilt to it. "Natalie?" he called. "I'm here!" She moved forward, turned left, then right, the walls never changing in color or texture. Another left, then she ran down a long corridor, the far end of it hidden in shadow, but she knew he was there. Faster. She could hear him calling out to her, but as she moved forward she would catch the faintest glimpse of something, a dark shape moving rapidly away from her, running away from her. At a loss, she stood at a junction and heard him call her name again, from somewhere else deep in the maze....

In frustration she placed her hands against the wall and pushed with all her might. At first nothing, then she felt the cold, slimy stones shift beneath her hands. Digging her heels into the dirt floor she pushed again and the wall fell away in front of her. But when she stepped forward through the dust she found herself standing in another corridor, exactly the same as the one she'd left.

"Natalie...."

His voice was growing fainter now, further away.

"Natalie..."

She pushed another wall in, then another and another to no avail.

"Natalie..."

Just one more wall, she thought, placing her palms flat against it. Just one more, then she'd stop and just go back to trying to puzzle her way out of the maze. As before the rocks shifted, then tumbled down at her feet.

This time, instead of a blank wall opposite her, there was LaCroix. And in his arms he held the man she'd killed outside The Raven.

"This is for you," he said, unceremoniously shoving the limp form of the man in her direction. "I hope you don't mind," he added as she caught sight of the two marks on his throat. "But we started without you..."

Her eyes shot open, and she quickly ran a hand through her hair. Thankfully

there was no blood-sweat this time, which made Natalie glad for small miracles. But she also decided that becoming a vampire made you dream in clichés. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and stretched. Old habit, that, really. She was completely wide awake and alert, no gunk in her eyes, and her muscles weren't cramped or stiff. In fact, she felt great. She estimated she'd only gotten a few hours of sleep, but was also aware that it was well after dark.

Just then the curtain moved aside, and she quickly pulled the sheet up to cover most of what was revealed by that red nightgown. It was Sarah, looking perfectly groomed and dressed in a simple green blouse and long black wrap-around skirt.

"I thought you were going to sleep all night," she said cheerfully, but Natalie was certain she caught a edge in her voice. "How did you sleep?"

Natalie cleared her throat. "Fine, thank you."

Sarah nodded, glancing over and taking in the four empty bottles lined up neatly in the corner. "Good. Come down to the club when you're ready."

Then she was gone, the curtain falling back into place. Natalie sat there with the covers pulled up to her chin for several moments looking after her, listening to the sounds of the house. As far as she could tell a lot of people were up; some were preparing to go out, some were watching TV or reading. They didn't have names or faces, she didn't know any of them nor did she have any sort of connection to them in any way.

Kind of like her at the moment, she realized. Maybe she had more in common with them than she was willing to admit. More than a few of the people seeking shelter here probably had to abruptly leave their lives behind, just like she had been forced to do.

Throwing back the covers, she rose and began sorting through the clothes Jose had left her the night before. Natalie was relieved; these were definitely far more appropriate than the scarlet negligee he'd brought for her to sleep in. She found a simple but well tailored red cotton blouse. Obviously Jenny had a penchant for red. There was also a pair of black slacks with matching black flats. Jose had a pretty good eye, she had to admit. Everything fit, even the shoes, thought Natalie realized she'd probably never have to worry about blisters from a new pair of shoes ever again.

She didn't have a hairbrush or a toothbrush, and wondered if she might find some in the bathroom. The door was still unlocked from the night before, and the facility was empty. She glanced around on the shelves, but found nothing useful and finally settled for running her fingers through her hair quickly even though it still looked like hell and rinsing her mouth out with water.

The liquid felt and tasted strange in her mouth. She spit it out quickly, then took another sip intending to swallow it. It made it only a short distance down her esophagus before she was retching it back up in the sink along with a small amount of blood. The dry heaves continued for several moments, and Natalie instantly began to sympathize with Nick, to understand why he'd go to such length to avoid having to eat anything if this is what it was always like.

However miserable this was, though, Natalie decided she'd try a couple of other different foods, particularly favorite ones, to see what the results were. There was also gradual exposure to consider; perhaps she'd eventually get to the point where she train herself to tolerate small portions of food. She'd certainly never managed to get that far

with Nick, though some of their experiments to that end had shown promise.

This line of thought reminded her once again of her notes, which were sitting in her apartment. They were fairly well hidden, and cryptic enough that they wouldn't present a danger to anyone if they found them. She hadn't been accused of anything; for all she knew, everyone thought she skipped town with Nick. However, her landlord had a key, as did one of her neighbors, who would certainly have gone over to take care of Sydney once the news about her disappearance broke.

Could she get into her apartment? She'd already decided that she'd go out and get as much ready cash as she could if Sarah would allow it. Was there any reason *not* to stop by her apartment? Her keys were gone, but that wasn't really a problem. She lived high enough up that she hadn't needed to worry about locking any windows other than the one near the fire escape. It would be a simple matter to get in. Even though she'd taken care with the notes, she would still feel better if she could retrieve them, not only for her own peace of mind, but because she also felt she owed it to Nick and the vampire community. Plus she wouldn't mind picking up some of her own clothes as well as a few keepsakes, things from her childhood that she wanted to keep.

But they'd be watching her apartment, in the same way they'd been watching Nick's loft. There'd be a guard out front, probably one or two to keep an eye on entrances, maybe someone keeping surveillance from a nearby apartment. They'd most certainly see her if she went there.

No, she decided there was simply too much risk in returning to her apartment. It was bad enough the authorities would know she was still in the city when she went to get money. She couldn't take the risk, as much as she wanted to. The time for her to visit her apartment had come and gone shortly after she'd woken up, during the time she'd pinned all her hopes on The Raven and there was no use lamenting the fact now when it was too late.

She exited the bathroom and walked across the hardwood floor. There were no obvious windows, but when she looked closely at some of the walls she could see the outlines of them, long bricked up to keep out the lethal rays of the sun. She also realized that this huge, impossible space resulted from the combination of two adjacent buildings, both gutted, and joined together extremely skillfully. Natalie still found herself wondering just how the building managed to remain standing. As far as she could see, all visible means of internal support had been removed. It had to be there somewhere, probably running up through some of the balconies and hidden with walls, but it was not in the least bit obvious.

The screens which had blocked off the rest of the house from the front entrance to the club had been removed, and no one seemed to be around on the main floor. She made her way with little trouble down to the basement which housed the club. The door in the little red hallway stood open, and Natalie could see a few people milling about, and all the lights were on, giving the large space a harsh, uninviting look.

Several people were gathered near the bar, among them Joanne, who glanced up at her when she walked in, then deliberately turned her attention away from her and resumed her conversation with another young woman whom Natalie didn't recognize. She was about to go over and join them, ask Joanne if she was all right, when out of the corner of her eye she saw Sarah wave her over to a secluded table. A bottle and two glasses sat in front of her.

Reluctantly, Natalie changed course and approached Sarah. "Care to join me for breakfast?" Sarah asked, picking up the bottle. The other woman's manner was bright, cheerful. Natalie nodded and took a seat as Sarah filled one of the glasses and pushed it toward her, then filled her own. "I must say, you paint a very different picture than you did last night," she said taking in Natalie's appearance.

Natalie glanced down self-consciously. "I have to thank Jose," she said, looking carefully at the glass. Now that she was well fed and not so desperate she took a good look at the contents of the glass. It made her feel just a little bit squeamish from this vantage point, now that she wasn't quite so starved. She took a long sip from her glass, paying attention to the coppery taste on her tongue. It didn't taste like quite the nectar all the vampire books described it as, though last night's experience in the alley probably warranted something like that term. Now it was cold and thick; satisfying yes, but more a simple nutrient than an experience.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Sarah spoke again. "So, what do you think of my place?" she asked conversationally.

"It's amazing," Natalie said, genuine admiration in her voice. "I've never seen anything like it."

"And you never will again," Sarah said knowingly. "Remind me to tell you about Mel one of these days." Natalie almost asked just then, but Sarah cut her off. "But not now. We have a couple of matters to discuss, don't we?"

Natalie nodded solemnly, and Sarah continued. "You should know that I'm not in the habit of taking in people's mistakes," she said without preamble. It made Natalie wince. She'd avoided thinking of herself that way, but she supposed she was in a sense. She was Nick's mistake. More importantly, she was her own mistake.

"Then why did you?" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Sarah looked at her intently. "This is my city, now that *he's* gone. It's easy to forget that with that comes a certain responsibility."

"He?" Natalie fished.

"You know," she said, with a small laugh. "The one you were looking for at The Raven."

"Is that why Joanne was there last night? Is she your spy?" Natalie had no idea why she was suddenly being so bold. Perhaps it was because she was tired of not knowing *anything*. Perhaps it was because she knew she wasn't going to get *any* answers without pressing for them.

"Yes, she is," Sarah said, sipping from her glass.

That made Natalie uneasy, she decided, both because of the unexpected though not unwelcome directness of the response and because of the implications.

"I wanted to make sure he was really gone," she continued. "Finding you was just an accident, a lucky one for you. Joanne says you were starving."

Natalie looked down at the table and nodded, her fingers playing with the stem of her glass. She resisted the urge to take a sip just at that moment. When Sarah reached out to place her hand on Natalie's arm, she flinched, and then casually moved away.

If Sarah was insulted or bothered by that it didn't show in her demeanor However, Natalie knew she'd irritated the other woman from her next words. "I'm afraid we're going to have to postpone our little talk about the rules until later. I've got a business meeting. You shouldn't have slept so long."

There it was again. For all her seemingly kind demeanor, there was definitely something harsh, something accusatory and unforgiving and almost scripted about Sarah. Something Natalie didn't like one bit. There wasn't an ounce of genuine compassion in this woman, she realized.

"So you'll have to entertain yourself for the evening," she said. "There are books. I'll make sure you have plenty to drink." She rose and emphasized her words by pushing the half-empty bottle over in her direction. "Stay out of the club tonight," were her final, brusque words as she walked away abruptly.

Natalie sat there for a moment, then refilled her glass from the bottle on the table, rather glad that Sarah was gone for now. When she looked up, intending to flag Joanne down the other woman was gone as well. Disappointed, Natalie wondered why she was so studiously avoiding her. Was she sorry for what had happened last night? Had Sarah warned her away to keep away?

She'd drink several bottles of this, then head out. Given her uncertainties about Sarah, it occurred to her that she was going to have to pay a price for all this blood sooner or later. Natalie was sure she wasn't going to like what that was. But she'd deal with that later, when she had a chance to pin the other woman down and get some answers, even if it meant giving up a few of her own. It was early evening, and the stores weren't going to be open too much longer. New clothes would have to wait until tomorrow.

In a way, Natalie decided that was actually good. It would give her gradual practice with being out among mortals rather than trying to do too much all at once and getting into trouble. She hadn't asked Sarah if she could go out, and decided that she was just as glad about that as well. There was nothing to indicate that she was a prisoner here, but someone would surely tell her if that was the case when the time came. She still wished someone would accompany her, though, and decided to look for Jose when she was finished with "breakfast."

The blood was helping a lot, she realized. Not only did she feel incredible, no aches or pains or fatigue, but the enhanced sensory acuity was becoming much easier to deal with too. She was getting better at filtering out the extraneous noise of the city, but now, as she thought about it, the sounds came to her. Natalie was pleased to discover she could will them away by focusing on her immediate surroundings again.

While she was out, she'd buy a newspaper. Even though the news might be several days old, she might find some reference to the investigation into hers and Nick's disappearance somewhere in the back of the news section. She mentally calculated the date. It was amazing when she really sat down and thought about it. So little time had actually passed, and so *much* had happened. Namely that she'd lost her whole entire life, one that, in the cold light of day (or night as the case may be), she had to admit hadn't been that great to begin with, in literally the span of a few short days.

Finishing off the last of the blood, Natalie rose and went to seek out Jose. As she walked across the empty, brightly lit floor of the club, she felt several pairs of eyes on her. Natalie decided she didn't particularly like it. She had the definite sense that they weren't looking out for her as much as they were keeping an eye on her.

Shrugging their stares off, she walked upstairs and glanced around. She didn't see him anywhere. Judging from the amount of hairspray and perfume that filled the air, several of the residents were getting ready for the evening, and as she glanced up at

some of the upper rooms she saw that not all of them were female. Deciding that Sarah had some interesting occupants in her building, she turned toward the stairs. Jose had said his room was three flights up, near the stairs. That worked out fine for her since she had to go up that way anyway.

First she'd get her coat and see if she could find at least another bottle of blood. Natalie paused for a moment, thinking how used she was already to drinking the stuff. And also realized that she had no idea where it was kept. Whatever she'd needed had been given to her, appearing mysteriously or waiting for her. Like now, she thought as she walked into the room she was using and saw two bottles sitting there. The empty ones had been removed. Natalie drank one down quickly, and slipped the other one into the pocket of the coat. The neck of the bottle stuck out, and there were no inside pockets, and she decided it made her look like a wino, but she didn't have much choice. Plasma bags were *much* better for traveling, though.

The coat was decidedly worse for wear, she realized looking at it. Trust Nick to buy and actually wear something as ridiculously flimsy and fragile and practically useless as this. Of course, she'd chosen it too, partially because of all the deep pockets, but also because she'd simply liked it, and always had. Now it was dusty and there were a few stains in the front that Natalie didn't have to guess at to identify. But when she looked at it more closely, she found several small odd rips on the back that she couldn't for the life of her figure where they'd come from'. Had she ripped it on something at The Raven?

Then it dawned on her, and she backed away from the coat as if it were some religious object warding her away, her hand clamped tightly over her mouth. She willed herself not to gag as the room seemed to spin for a moment. Those rips... She remembered how the man she'd killed had struggled with her, remembered the feel of his hands as they tried to push her away, then as his fingers dug into her back.

He'd ripped the coat as she'd murdered him.

She had to get out, had to stand in the fresh air for a bit and be away from all this for a short while. But she wouldn't, couldn't wear the coat so she left it, and the blood behind as she fled from the room and started up the stairs, trying not to think of anything, trying to forget about the ruined coat, and the blood, and a dead man lying in a deserted nightclub across town.

There was one balcony near the room, accessible only by a short jump from the stairs. It was a long drop, not that she needed to worry about it, Natalie mused as she looked over the side of the railing. There were landings as the stairs wound around, and she paused at the one just beneath the room that she thought was Jose's. There were beads strung across the front of it, obscuring the recesses of the room from view. Natalie peered more intently through the beads and thought she saw someone lying haphazardly across a futon. As she decided whether or not to wake him she discerned another body tangled in there with him.

"Okay," Natalie said softly to herself, feeling oddly embarrassed, even though she hadn't actually done anything. Like a voyeur she decided, although Jose--and judging from some of the stuff she'd heard last night--most of the other occupants didn't seem to mind the lack of privacy. Another reason to get out of here, she thought. Sarah had said no mortals were to stay there last night which meant this...person (she couldn't tell if it was male or female) was a vampire as well, Natalie found herself wondering idly as she

resumed climbing the steps toward the roof.

At the top she paused and turned, glancing down into the building. As much as she'd felt watched earlier, it was as if she was suddenly invisible now, she thought as she glanced around. That bothered her slightly, and she hesitated, reconsidered putting aside her chagrin and waking Jose. Or even running the idea past Sarah just to make herself feel better. While she wavered, Natalie saw Sarah step out of a room toward the back of the building and walk across the floor to the club. Natalie watched as she carefully glanced around, taking in everyone's whereabouts, including her own. Then she disappeared without a backward glance, her gaze neither pausing nor lingering.

"Okay," Natalie said again. Obviously Sarah knew exactly where she was, even if she didn't know exactly what she was up to. For all Sarah knew, Natalie was just going to go out for a breath of fresh air, she thought as she pushed open the door to the deserted rooftop.

It was a cloudier, slightly cooler night than the last two, with the hint of rain in the air. She stood for a moment getting her bearings, feeling the mist fall lightly on her face, though the damp chill in the air didn't bother her in the least. She'd have to pay close attention to where she went, not straying too far from this place, and so she'd be able to find her way back. While she and Joanne had wandered around town last night she'd tried to followed the route quite closely so as not to lose her way. She'd done a pretty good job, she thought, and had a fairly specific mental map of where in he city she was.

Unfortunately, she wasn't terribly familiar with this part of town, though by her reckoning she thought there might be something to the east that would suffice. She remembered flying over one of those small neighborhood shopping districts, and it seemed logical to assume there'd be a bank there. Whether it had a cash machine or not was another matter.

Double checking to make sure she still had her credit cards and the small amount of cash she'd pulled out of her wallet yesterday, Natalie took to the air. Like dealing with the sensory over-load, flying was easier as well, now that she had consumed a fairly substantial among of human blood, enough to stave off the severe hunger pangs for at least a little while. It was all about blood, she realized. It would always be all about blood.

It was kind of exhilarating, Natalie decided, flying over the city, feeling it move all around her. But she had to be careful not to get too caught up in the excitement and the sensations. She was out to find a bank machine and get some cash. Once that was complete, she'd return to Mel's and try to have a talk with Sarah about leaving town. It was time she made some attempt to regain control of her life again. Wasn't *that* what this little trip was all about as well, she asked herself.

She landed on a rooftop near a section of town that she thought might yield something and peered over the edge. Cursing to herself she spotted a cash machine on the street about a block and a half away, but there were a lot of people out. It wasn't that late, she realized, and a lot of people were either coming home or going out. It was Friday; she hadn't even thought about the weekend crowd and as a result had chosen something a little too close to the bars.

There was always the option of continuing on, hoping she'd find an area with a little less evening activity. Or she could simply wait until it thinned out a bit, then go

down. Quickly, however, she ruled out the second option. She didn't really want to be out any longer than she needed to be. Which had some bearing on the first option as well, she thought. How dangerous would it be, she wondered, if she were to just slip down there, max out her bank account and her credit cards, then slip away into the night again? She'd made it all the way to The Raven without a mishap the other night, though she was well aware that that couple had been in fairly significant danger for a time there. But she'd managed to control herself, and she'd fed very well for the last day and a half. True, the hunger was there, but it was always there lurking beneath the surface. Now, though, it wasn't a stabbing, maddening hunger like it had been that day in The Raven. Could she trust herself?

Natalie stood on the roof for several long moments, carefully weighing the options, assessing her level of hunger. She didn't *think* she was a danger, and she reasoned that had to count for something. All those other times, she'd known the potential tragedy, both with the couple and then later with the homeless man. She'd been immediately aware of the danger she posed to them. Right now, with the hunger held at bay from feeding well, she felt in control and strong.

She didn't think she was a danger.

Her decision made, Natalie launched herself into the air, deciding to take the extra precaution of dropping to the ground as near to the cash machine as possible. That meant moving over to the building that housed the bank. She'd never noticed the number of alley and obscured, dark corners in Toronto before, but now she was doubly glad for their existence as she landed lightly in the alley next to the bank, then slipped out onto the street. A quick glance up and down indicated that the coast was clear as far as there being too much street or pedestrian traffic, and there was no one currently using the ATM.

Natalie dug into her pocket and quickly pulled out the three credit cards she'd happened to be carrying with her that night, and her ATM card. All of them had a maximum cash advance limit of $500. She didn't have huge resources as far as money was concerned, and once she used these cards it would be difficult to empty out her bank accounts since she had a feeling they'd be watching her bank activity. If she used all four of these cards, she'd have two thousand dollars, more than enough to buy a few supplies and get out of the city. Not nearly enough for what she had a feeling Sarah's place was going to cost her over time.

And, she also reasoned, she wasn't exactly accused of any crime as far as she knew, and therefore there wasn't anything the authorities could actually do to prevent her from accessing her money. Which meant she could get more tomorrow until her accounts were empty. If they used it to track her, she'd have to double back at least once, when she decided where she was heading.

As she fed the first card, her Visa card into the machine, she took a moment to look over her shoulder. It was still clear; no one seemed to think a woman getting cash from a cash machine was anything odd, and why should they. But she could feel the press of mortal metabolisms, mortal blood all around her. She forced herself not to relax as she withdrew the cash for each of her cards until she had $2000 in bills tucked into her pocket.

"Now all I'd need is to get mugged," she said to herself, turning away from the machine, her ATM card in hand. It didn't seem likely, though, not with all the people

about. And now she was certainly more than capable of defending herself from would-be attackers, thought the thought made her feel cold inside.

A newspaper, she reminded herself. She'd meant to buy a newspaper while she was out too. There was a newsstand about a block away, near the subway station. She'd grab the evening edition of the Toronto Star and be on her way, saving it to read at Mel's since she was thankfully banished from the club.

That's when she noticed the squad car. It turned the corner onto the street on which she was standing. Hastily, Natalie turned and walked in the opposite direction, fighting down the urge to just take to the sky and run. If she acted normal, there was no reason in the world for them to suspect anything unusual and out of the ordinary. Trying to run, even with vampiric speed, would only draw attention to her and she couldn't afford that right at the moment.

When they drove past her, though the car moved more slowly than she thought it should have, Natalie breathed a sigh of relief. In all likelihood they were on patrol and hadn't noticed her, and were now continuing on about their business. So she decided to continue on about hers as quickly as possible. Ducking her head, she doubled back, heading toward the alley she'd originally dropped down in, deciding an evening paper was just too risky right now. Jose could get her one later if she still wanted it, she thought.

"Doctor Lambert?" a male voice called to her from over to her left before she'd gotten more than a dozen yards. Out of instinct, she turned her head, and saw that the squad car that had passed her earlier was pulled up along side her. Quickly she realized they'd driven past her, then backed up beside her while her attention had been on making her escape. Damn, why hadn't she bothered to pay attention? Why had she assumed she was safe?

But the mistake had been made. One of them, the one in the passenger seat was getting out of the car and walking around it toward her. She didn't move; it simply didn't occur to her at first to run. In her world, in her old life, you simply didn't do that. Police officers were there to help; she *worked* with them every day, for heavens sake. You didn't run from them.

"Doctor Natalie Lambert?" he asked again as he approached her cautiously.

It started kicking in then. Common sense was telling her to get the hell out of there before something horrible happened. She should *never* have allowed them to see her, should never have reacted to her name. They'd want her to go with them down to the station. They'd want to ask her if she knew where Nick was. That couldn't happen; it would be better for everyone if she disappeared along with Nick and now it was too late for that. She'd screwed up.

Without thinking she began to back away from him, some part of her mind telling her to slip away, get into the alley away from all these witnesses and up into the air. As she moved, he said something, and the other one was out of the car moving toward her as well. She turned and quickly ran down the street, turned the corner rapidly, hoping to get out of their line of sight and into the nearest shadow to make her escape. But as she rounded the corner another squad car was sitting there. Waiting for her? Had they called for back-up?

It confused her for a moment, and without thinking she slowed, then instinctively turned and run back the way she came. And instead, ran right into the arms of the

officer who had first approached her

He grabbed her arm.

She grabbed his neck. She'd intended to just push him away, but instinct and terror and panic drove her to wrap her fingers around his neck. She heard a sickening crunch of bone and cartilage as his trachea collapsed beneath her palm.

In seconds he was dead.

His partner was coming up as she dropped him numbly to the ground and looked up. The officer slowed, and pulled out his gun as he looked down at the fallen man.

For a minute, all she could do was stand there and look at him, not quite able to comprehend what she had done. She hadn't *meant* to kill him. When she opened her mouth to tell the one advancing on her that very thing no sound would come out.

He raised his gun and was shouting something at her, words she couldn't, in her present state of shock and disbelief comprehend. Something about standing still and keeping her hands where he could see them. Another pair of officers were coming up behind her, a man and a woman. She was also vaguely aware that a small crowd of people were gathering.

She had to get out of here. It was no longer a matter of just being detained and asked questions about Nick. Now they would arrest her for murder, lock her away in a cell. She had too many things to hide now.

Whirling she faced down the two police officers approaching her from behind and hissed at them to warn them away. The first officer, now behind her, was shouting something, and it was then that she realized she'd changed; her fangs were down, her eyes no doubt glowed. It wasn't hunger that had brought this on. It was an instinctive defensive posture, brought on by fear.

Some part of her knew she could easily tear the throats out of all three of the remaining police officers with barely any effort at all. That thought drove her up into the sky, heedless of all the witnesses. More people would die if she didn't get away right now; she couldn't bring herself to care who saw.

Something tore and burned its way through her ribs and burst out of her chest in a splatter of blood and tissue. There was pain, though she barely noticed it as the sensation was repeated, and an unyielding piece of metal lodged itself somewhere deep in her abdomen.

They were shooting at her, all three of them now, as three more slugs slammed into her body before she could get very far. It distracted her, and the pain was worse now, so much so that she dropped back to the ground, staggering and stumbling against the wall. Huddling there for a moment she marshaled her resources and tried desperately to normalize her features, to drown out the sound of people shouting at her, punctuated by their accelerated heartbeats. An officer was approaching her again, slowly, cautiously, and he was still talking to her. She raised her head and snarled loudly at him, and saw him jump back away from her quickly, the gun back up and on her.

She rushed them, seizing one and all but throwing him out of the way as she attempted to reach the alley. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him slam into the side of the building, and the smell of his blood burst across her senses. He left a trail of it as he slid down the side of the building.

Then she was in the air and the ground, the chaos and violence falling away from

her as she flew blindly through the sky. At some point she stopped to get her bearings, dropped down onto a deserted roof, hands resting on knees and gasping as if she'd just finished running a marathon. She had to return to Mel's, tell them what she had done. It was the only place she could go.

By the time she landed on the roof of Mel's she was sobbing. And Jose was standing out there fanatically watching her approach.

"What happened?" he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders as she dropped to the roof and collapsed into a heap. She shook him off roughly, not wanting to be touched, and retreated quickly to the edge. Natalie felt weak and disoriented and hungry. But all she could do was fold her arms across her body and weep. There weren't even words.

A commotion sounded on the roof at some point, and Natalie felt herself being hauled to her feet and dragged inside by large, rough hands that were vaguely familiar. No noise filtered from anywhere in the house; it was as still and quiet as a tomb at midnight, save for the clumping of feet against wood and her own whimpering.

The blow, an open handed slap that stung across her face, didn't do anything to draw her out, but the second one which was considerably harder did. She felt her jaw dislocate painfully from the blow, and then someone was shaking her so hard she was sure her teeth rattled in her head.

"What happened?" someone was shouting. "These are bullet holes!"

Natalie had never considered herself one of those hysterical females who needed to be slapped into comprehension. But then, neither had she ever considered herself a murderer, and she had just finished killing one police officer, quite possibly two. She couldn't gather her wits, couldn't focus on anything around her, and quite honestly had absolutely no idea how she'd managed to find her way back to this place. Some bizarre homing instinct or something, she thought idly.

She'd mostly stopped crying, and realized that Jose was cradling her head in his lap, his arms around her protectively.

"I'm sorry, Sarah! I'm sorry, this was my fault," he said. "I didn't watch her carefully enough. This was my fault."

Heels clacked against the floor. "First," Sarah said, and Natalie could clearly hear the venom in her voice, "I want to know what happened. Then we'll talk about who's responsible." Fingers grasped her chin, forcing her head up so that she had to look into Sarah's face. "Natalie, what happened?" When Natalie didn't answer right away, she turned to someone. "Check the news, and get someone on the scanner." When she turned back to Natalie, she leaned down and grabbed her hair, pulling Natalie's head up sharply. "Tell me what happened. Why did you go out?"

"I--I went..." Natalie began, her voice weak. "I went out to get some money," she managed to get out. "I thought I'd be okay."

"Who shot you?" Sarah's voice was very harsh.

"P-police," she stammered. "I killed them. Oh, God, I killed two of them."

"How many were there?" This was someone else, a voice she didn't recognize.

"F... There w-were four." She was shaking now, and her teeth were chattering. "And people." There was another crowd gathering; she had the sense of a large number of people clustered around her.

"Shit," she heard someone exclaim.

Sarah waved them into silence. "Why did they shoot you?"

Natalie nodded. "They recognized me. I tried to fly away, after--I broke his neck and..." She began to retch then, small droplets of blood staining the hand she had over her mouth, and Jose was pressing part of his t-shirt to her lips.

"It's all right," he murmured softly. Then he said in a louder voice, "Get her some blood!"

"Hold off on that," Sarah said sharply, cutting him off. "You broke the neck of one of them. What about the other?"

Natalie took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. "I...shoved him out of the way. I pushed him too hard. I think I killed him."

Sarah released her hair and leaned back away from her. "So you didn't drain either one of them?" she asked.

Looking up at her in confusion for a moment, Natalie shook her head numbly.

"Good," Sarah said, and the sense of relief that was coming off the other woman was almost palpable, even to Natalie's somewhat confused state. "It'll be easier to cover up." She turned and was about to issue several orders to that effect when the woman Sarah had dispatched to check the police scanners returned. "Well?" Sarah asked shortly.

"They're both dead. Broken neck and head injury. And they were already looking for her."

"Why?"

"They found a homeless guy across town. Her wallet and keys were found near the body. Pulled some prints off of him too, and they're betting they'll match."

Jose went absolutely still; she felt him stiffen, and when Natalie looked up, he was staring at Sarah accusingly, fury etched clearly across his handsome features. He opened his mouth to speak, shifting her weight in his hands slightly.

But she continued on with her news. "Now for the *really* bad news."

"Do I want to know?" Sarah asked, her tone indicating that she clearly did not.

The woman paused for a moment, looking down at Natalie who saw something indefinable in her eyes, something akin to pity.. But before Natalie could do anything more than attempt to identify it, she was looking away, licking her lips. "It happened right in front of a crowd of people. And...there's talk of a video tape."

The entire room seemed to burst at just that moment. For her part, Sarah turned quickly away from the poor woman bearing the bad news and clutched at her head, gathering up her long curly hair into her hands in frustration. Several of those who stood nearby cursed, and more than one leaned toward her threateningly.

There was nothing forgiving or sympathetic in Sarah's expression as she finally turned to her and spoke. "She's my responsibility. It's up to me to take care of her. I have to make sure nothing like this happens again." Then she turned to Dave, the bouncer who'd let her in to the club last night, the one she'd gotten into trouble. Sarah nodded at him and said decisively, "Take her up to the roof and stake her. Leave her out there for the sun."

She wasn't hearing this, she *couldn't* be hearing this, Natalie thought to herself even as Jose rose with her and pressed her behind him, shielding her protectively with his body. "No!" he said loudly. "You can't."

"I can, and I will"

Someone grabbed her, yanked her away from Jose. She saw that they grabbed him too, held him down in the corner, as she felt Dave's meaty hand wrap itself around her neck and shoulder. There were shouts and cries from all around her.

Dave was taking the opportunity to work the group up into a horrible mob mentality, alternating between dragging her behind him up the steps, and shoving her forward like some awful trophy, his grip never relaxing. But she noticed one or two, including the woman who'd provided all the information, who hung back, seemed unsure and reluctant.

At first she fought. And kicked. And screamed. And clawed. But Dave was *much* stronger, and he dragged her up the stairs, though the doorway and out into the night. Once on the roof he flung her to the ground and stood over her, holding a large wooden stake. There were hands wrapped firmly around her arms and legs. They held her spread-eagled down on the roof.

It was at that point that she decided to stop struggling, decided to stop fighting to stay alive. Because it occurred to her that perhaps this was the right thing, the best thing. The only thing that would prevent her from killing or hurting anyone else.

Natalie looked up at Dave with the stake as he towered above her and wondered how much it would hurt. And for how long.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Natalie allowed her head to fall back against the blacktop of the roof. She wouldn't watch. There wasn't any need.. Richard had died this way. Considering her role in that disaster as well as her most recent sins, it seemed proper and just that she should die this way as well.

This is where Nick would come crashing through the nearest window, she thought. Except there weren't any windows up here, and Nick wasn't anywhere near enough that he could fly to her rescue; he probably didn't even *know* she was in need of a rescue And Natalie was no longer certain she even wanted one.

They were all gathered around her in a ring, watching. Some with anticipation, some with trepidation, some with obvious doubt and discomfort. All unable to turn away. Maybe some of them were curious, she thought, wanting to know exactly how it was done, or what happened afterwards, questions she'd asked herself from time to time since that night she'd met Nick.

Now she was about to find out first hand.

Someone broke into the ring. Her rescuer, Natalie thought distractedly as Jose pushed several of them aside and entered the circle to approach them. No doubt he'd managed to break free from those who'd grabbed him downstairs.

Jose headed directly toward Dave, and it was clear he intended to stop him. Dave saw it too, and as Natalie looked up at the large vampire standing over her, she saw that his eyes were cold and full of hate. And she sensed the movement of the stake toward her rather than saw it.

Now it was a question of who would win, who would achieve their goal first.

Jose was fast. But not fast enough.

He reached them just as Dave brought the wooden stake down toward her with a savage thrust of his arm. Jose tried to block it, tried to knock it out of the way, and partially succeeded. Dave had been aiming to impale her through her heart; Natalie could tell by the angle with which he brought the piece of wood down toward her. But Jose managed to deflect it enough so that the wood buried itself in through her upper

right lung, just under the collarbone and near the shoulder. It went all the way through with a horrible crunching and sucking sound as it tore its way through bone and tissue and flesh, and the tip of it sank several inches into the roof.

Those who'd been holding her released her as the stake slammed into her, and Natalie was certain she heard some of them laughing. Whether they were laughing at her, or at Dave for having missed she wasn't sure, nor did she really care all that much. Everything was lost in the excruciating, burning pain raging through her where the stake had entered her body and in the shriek that rose unbidden from her lips.

Her left hand, as soon as it was released, wrapped itself around the piece of wood and tugged in an ineffectual attempt to pull it from her body. It hurt more than anything in her experience. More than the bones she'd broken the other night. More than the bullet wounds from earlier. Those had been over quickly, had healed quickly. But this... Natalie could feel the connective tissue and the cartilage attempt to knit itself back together inside her, only to be prevented by the stake, causing more pain as half-healed nerve endings rubbed themselves raw against the foreign object. She was aware of every single splinter of wood as it rubbed against the bones and tissue inside her body. But pulling on it only made the pain worse, as did movement, something she discovered when she reflexively brought her knees up in an attempt to curl around the stake. So instead, she laid there, pinned to the roof, and whimpered, hoping someone would pull it out and dreading the thought at the same time.

They were still watching, all of them gathered about, as Jose bent over her. He placed his foot lightly on her chest and wrapped his hands around the piece of wood. But Sarah stepped between him, and through the raging pain she heard her speak.

"No, Jose! It's over. Let her be." Sarah's posture was defensive, her whole demeanor full of menace and warning.

"She's in *pain*," he said harshly. Jose looked past Sarah, down at her, scowling. "Do you know who she is?" he asked Sarah. Then he repeated the question to the group at large, shouting it out to them. "Do you know who she is?"

"Enough!" Sarah commanded sharply, even as Natalie, through her haze of agony, saw several of them nod.

"She saved us from the fever!" Jose continued, ignoring Sarah's warning. "She saved me. And you!" he added pointing to someone in the crowd. "And you, and you, and you! And she covered up for *you* when you thought the asteroid was coming and fed on anything you could get your hands on!" This last was said with one accusing finger pointed at a young woman standing near the edge of the crowd, a teenage girl with short black hair and too much makeup.

It was silent on the roof now, although Natalie could hear herself making small whimpering noises. She hated it, but she couldn't help it either. They were alternating between looking at her and looking at Jose.

"This is Natalie Lambert," Jose continued, his voice dropping down now that there was no longer any need to shout to get their attention. "A week ago she was the county coroner. Now she's one of *us*."

"And such a lovely way of showing your appreciation," another voice called sarcastically from near the edge of the roof, a voice distinctly familiar to Natalie. The last time she'd heard it, it had sounded tentative, unsure and a little shy, though mixed with a newfound resolve. Now, all the familiar arrogance and haughty superiority was

back.

With an effort, Natalie lifted her head and saw Janette standing near the edge of the roof, the city making an impressive, almost dazzling backdrop behind her. To her eyes Janette, as always, looked beautiful; now, in addition to that she looked impossibly heroic as her gaze swept across the scene to rest on Sarah.

The rage in Janette's eyes was unmistakable.

Sarah's reaction was immediate. Sarah stepped forward defiantly, placing herself between Natalie and Janette, placing her hands on her hips.

"Get out!" Sarah ordered. "This is my business."

Janette looked past Sarah down at her. "I can see that," she said, stepping forward and brushing disdainfully past Sarah. "Interesting approach." Without waiting for Sarah to respond, she leaned forward and looked down at Jose who was crouched next to her. "Pull the stake out," she said softly, resting her hand lightly on his arm. Then she turned and glared at Sarah, and Natalie was certain she was daring the other woman to interfere.

Sarah remained quiet. Following Sarah's lead, no one else stepped forward to question Janette's order.

Tears were gathering in the corner of her eyes, not at all helped by the pain caused when Jose rose and grasped the stake again. Once again he lightly placed his foot on her abdomen and leaned down to grasp the top of the wood with both hands.

"This will hurt," he warned her softly. "I'm sorry."

"No kidding," Natalie managed to gasp out, then reached up and grasped the collar of his t-shirt, twisting the fabric tightly in the fingers of her left hand. She watched as Jose prepared himself, then paused, but didn't realize that someone else had approached until a cool, dry hand dropped over her mouth. Natalie looked up to see the teenager Jose had pointed out earlier.

She smiled, her expression a mixture of reassurance and apology. "To stop you from screaming," she said. "Go ahead and bite down if it hurts too much."

Natalie wished everyone would stop warning her about the pain and just get it over with. Instead, she silently shook her head, wincing at the renewed pain, then turned to look at Janette, who was standing just behind Jose's shoulder. And just behind her Sarah watched, her expression composed.

"One," Jose said, tightening his fingers around the wood. "Two," he added a second later. Natalie closed her eyes and waited for three.

And instead felt an excruciating pressure as Jose leaned his weight on the foot he had resting against her and gave the stake a mighty jerk. Natalie felt it rip free of the roof beneath her and move upward through her upper ribcage, leaving behind dozens of small splinters imbedded in the wound, The sudden pain caused her fingers to contract, and she vaguely heard the fabric of Jose's shirt tear, felt it give in her hand as her body arched, pulled upward by the pain and by the momentum of the stake as it pulled free from her body.

She screamed. Or rather tried to, the sound coming out as a long, hoarse roar against the splayed fingers of the hand pressed across her lips.

"We have to clean the wound, before it heals with all the wood in it," she heard Jose say from a great distance. Then she shrieked again as she felt Jose scoop her up into his arms like a child, the movement causing spikes of agony to travel throughout her

body.

As they moved, her right arm hung limp at her side. She couldn't move it, but it swayed with each step Jose took, and Natalie wanted to die every time that happened. Instead, she pressed her good hand tightly against her face, and willed herself not to scream. She wasn't particularly successful.

"I want a private room" she heard Janette order from behind her somewhere, talking presumably to Sarah. "First aid supplies. And blood," she added. "I must congratulate you Sarah. You've managed to incapacitate the one person here who's qualified to treat injuries." The scorn in her voice was evident, but beneath that was an edge of bitterness, of fury barely held in check. "Once this matter is settled, I'll deal with you," Janette continued.

If Sarah had anything to say about all of this Natalie didn't hear it as they moved down the steps. At some point she stopped caring about the many conversations going on around her and just focused on blocking out the torment her injuries were causing her. She barely noticed as they moved into an isolated part of the house, and Jose laid her gently down on a soft mattress.

He didn't waste any time, but leaned over her and tore most of the already ruined blouse down and away from her shoulder to get better access to the wound. Natalie couldn't resist, and twisted her head to the side to examine the injury as well. It was a large, angry hole in her chest, but Natalie realized it was already starting to heal. Reaching up with her left hand, Natalie gently probed the edges of the wound with her fingers, trying not to wince, until Jose grasped her fingers gently and moved her hand away.

"Natalie?" Janette's voice, coming from somewhere near her head, broke through the haze. Natalie tilted her head back to look up at her. "Tell Jose what to do," she said softly, but in such a way that it never occurred to Natalie not to obey her.

At first she couldn't speak, and so she simply nodded slowly, her eyes narrowing in an attempt to prevent more tears from forming. Then in a raw voice she addressed Jose. "Water. Flush out the wound. Get," she paused to draw a breath, attempting to remain calm. "Get most of...wood out. Keep wound open." Just getting those few words out seemed to sap all her energy, and as Jose left her side to fetch water, and other first aid supplies, she closed her eyes and attempted to rest. Natalie had never had occasion to clean this type of wound for Nick, but she'd given it a lot of thought. Get the debris out, and let nature take care of the rest she'd decided. The same principle applied to bullet wounds. Which reminded her she had one inside her that she should probably have removed as soon as she was able.

Jose returned after what seemed like hours. He knelt beside her and gently slid his hands underneath her shoulder blade, lifting her slightly from the bed. Natalie tried not to whimper as he slid a folded towel beneath her.

"The wound's almost closed up," he said, and the edge of panic in his voice wasn't lost on her.

"You'll have to open it," she replied weakly. She could still feel the wood in there, despite the fact that a good portion of the damage had healed itself up. There was still enough in there to cause a substantial amount of pain. If she was going to function again she would have to have it removed. "Knife," she managed to add. She wanted to tell him to sterilize it, but realized it didn't really matter now, that at this point it was

merely a matter of protocol.

He'd thought to bring one, and as the tip of it pressed against her flesh, as Jose hesitated, Natalie shivered. For all that she'd been through this evening, this small amount of pain shouldn't bother her. But it was going to *hurt* and she'd had enough hurt tonight, she thought plaintively. Natalie had to actively fight the urge to pull away as she felt the cold metal slide into the newly healed flesh.

Janette remained silent, watching, but at some point she realized Janette's fingers were twined with her own. Natalie had no idea if she'd unconsciously taken Janette's hand, or whether Janette had reached out to comfort her. In the end she decided that it didn't really matter, and just gave the hand in hers a reassuring squeeze, which was answered after several seconds.

Then she reluctantly let go, because it became clear that she was going to have to actively participate in this. Jose was having a great deal of trouble cleaning out the wound, and was extremely unnerved and very clumsy. Painfully clumsy. Natalie finally reached up and placed her fingers over his, taking the knife from his trembling fingers. She was too weak for this; her limbs felt heavy and even though she could distinctly feel the location of every splinter she didn't do much better than Jose as she dug into the muscle and tissue, willing herself to ignore the pain it caused.

After a time, she'd gotten as many as possible from the front, and instructed Jose to roll her over onto her side. The rest was up to him as she rested weakly against the mattress, her hand limp in Janette's. She wanted blood. She needed blood, but she understood why they didn't give her any. It kept her from healing up too fast.

As Jose continued to alternate between slicing open the path of the stake and digging for stray pieces of wood Natalie began to feel a familiar cold seep into her. She'd probably lost quite a bit of blood up on the roof, though that was something that had always amazed her about Nick; he never seemed to bleed much.

But the cold. She'd felt it before, an awful chill seeping into her bones, making her feel heavy and weak, a terrible ache in her joints. The world around her seemed bright yet it seemed as if there was a wall up between her and it. She could see but it was as if she couldn't comprehend; it was as if her mind had stopped processing the information that went in.

When had she felt this way? To distract herself from the immediate agony Natalie tried to pinpoint it. She felt like she was dying, and the thought sent the chill seeping even deeper into her innards. This is how she'd felt as Nick had drained her. The feelings were the same she was sure, some awful version of state-dependent learning kicking in as the details flooded back, too many to process in detail. The things she'd seen as he drank from her, the sensation completely fulfilling and horribly obscene at the same time.

In revulsion, she'd wanted to push him far away. In ecstasy, she'd wanted to stay there forever.

A sharp jab brought her to the present, and she gasped. Jose paused, then continued to examine the wound for several more moments, dabbing liberal amounts of water into it. "I think I've got it all," he said. Natalie concentrated on the place where the stake had gone through her, and after a moment nodded. Between the two of them they'd managed to take care of the worst of it, though Natalie still felt a twinge or two deep inside. She'd deal with it later when she felt stronger. "Thank you," she whispered

as he dabbed at it with a towel, getting up what was left of the blood and water, then gently rolled her onto her back. Still unable to move her right arm, she reached up with her left and grasped his hand, not minding the blood, her blood, that stained his fingers.

Sleep. She wanted to sleep. And she was so hungry.

"Will she be all right?" she heard Jose ask, his voice strained with worry. "She looks bad."

"She will," was Janette's curt reply. "Would you do me one more favor?"

"Of course," Jose replied, and Natalie imagined the two of them huddled together near the doorway, talking in whispers. They made a nice looking couple, she thought idly, both dark and exotic looking.

"See if you can find out anything more about what happened earlier.."

"I will," Jose said.

"Good," Janette said. "Good night. And thank you."

She felt rather than heard Janette approach the bed, then felt the mattress shift as she sat down. "The tape," Natalie managed to mumble. She felt numb, as if some excruciating cold had swept in and sucked out all her energy.

She remembered that she was dying, and was glad. It would all be over soon.

"We'll worry about that later, hm?" Janette said lightly. Then Janette's fingers slipped beneath her neck, and Natalie felt herself being gently lifted. With a supreme effort she managed to open her eyes.

Janette sat near her. It took several seconds before Natalie could focus on her. "This will help," Janette said, lifting her wrist to her mouth. As Natalie watched, Janette bit lightly down on her wrist. When she tilted her head back, her lips and teeth were stained slightly crimson.

Janette's grip on her neck became firmer, and she pressed the wounded wrist to her mouth.

"No!" Natalie said, disgust flooding through her as she tried to turn her head away, though she was far too weak to put up much of a resistance. But Janette held her tightly, and continued to hold her wrist to her mouth.

"What you really need," Janette said softly, conversationally, as the first drops made their way past her lips and onto her tongue, "is the blood of your maker." There was a pause as Janette sighed, a sound full of exasperation and sadness, a sound Natalie knew all too well herself. "But this will have to suffice."

It wasn't like the bottled blood, and it wasn't the same as when she'd taken it from the homeless man. It wasn't warm, no beating heart forced it into her mouth. In fact, Natalie was rather disgusted to discover she had to actively draw upon Janette's wrist, and since Janette seemed fairly set on her doing so, Natalie didn't see that she had much choice, though it struck her as uncomfortably intimate. Janette continued talking to her, soft words meant to soothe, but Natalie was no longer listening. She'd given up trying to escape Janette's grip, and was working on getting past her revulsion at drinking from her. The small sucking sound she made against Janette's skin weren't helping, she decided.

But there was something about it, something safe and familiar in the taste as it passed her lips and traveled down into her belly. And before she was quite aware of it, she had seized Janette's hand with her good one, holding her arm in place as she drank lest Janette try to take it away. Janette's blood drove away the coldness that was settling

in her bones and made her feel strong, alive. Natalie clung to it, clung to the comfort and the familiarity she suddenly found in both the simple mortal act of holding a friend's hand and in the stranger yet more satisfying contact of the blood of her own kind as it flowed into her.

When Natalie closed her eye, images passed in front of her in the darkness. Many of them were unrecognizable, scenes from other places and other times. Predominant among them were three men. A dark-haired man his face lit by the flickering of flames from a nearby fire. LaCroix, his face gilded by moonlight. And Nick also lit by fire, but one that raged out of control as red as his eyes as he tilted his head back. Natalie tried to hold on to that one, that last one, to look for just a moment longer on the image of Nick's face.

An image that was wrenched away at the exact moment that Janette pulled her wrist free. Natalie moaned in protest as Janette reached over and picked up a bottle, holding it to her lips. It wasn't the same and Natalie realized she was vaguely disappointed as she drank deeply from the bottle. She finished that and two more before Janette allowed her head to fall back against the pillow.

"Sleep now," Janette said, gently smoothing the hair back from her forehead. Again, Natalie gave no thought to her words except to obey them and closed her eyes, drifting off immediately. She felt Janette pull the remainder of her ruined clothes off, then pull something soft and silky across her body.

Diplomacy is to do and say
The nastiest thing in the nicest way.
--Isaac Goldberg

Fourth night...

She stood frowning at herself in the big hall mirror in her grandmother's house, the long one that her grandmother always stood in front of before going to church. She was going to the prom. And her dress...strapless, knee length.

Pink. Pink wasn't really her color and she wondered who had chosen this dress since it was certainly not one she would have picked out for herself. Without warning, her grandmother appeared beside her in the mirror, her face twisted with familiar disappointment.

"You are not leaving this house dressed like that! For shame!" she admonished in her thick accent. "For shame! Only dirty girls wear dresses like that!' she said. "See!"

And Nana stepped back, indicating the sitting room with a wave of her hand. Janette was standing in there, her deep burgundy gown looking stunning contrast to her pale skin. Natalie felt even more ridiculous; Janette looked beautiful compared to her.

Was that her date, she wondered. He was in there with Janette, his face pressed into her shoulder as he stood behind her and Natalie felt a stab of jealousy.

"You see?" her grandmother was saying, gesturing wildly into the sitting room. "Dirty! Dirty! You're just as dirty!"

Janette was looking at her with something akin to an apology on her face. And when the man with her lifted his face Natalie wanted to run away from him, from his fangs and his glowing red eyes, such a contrast to his boyish face.

"Richard!" Nana scolded. "You stop that! Come out of there! Get away from that awful girl!"

With a horrible grin that made Natalie's insides twist in fear, Richard pushed Janette away from him and began walking toward them. Natalie saw that he had blood splattered all down his chin and on the white of his tuxedo shirt.

"Hi, sis!" he said in a deep, gravely voice as he grabbed her shoulders. Instinctively Natalie put her hands up to his chest, then stopped in horror. She was wearing long white gloves that covered her forearms. But the fingers were stained crimson and they added to the stains already on Richard's shirt.

"Richard, come away from that awful girl!" Nana was admonishing again.

She'd taken Janette's place in the sitting room. She was wearing Janette's dress. "Leave that dirty girl be! She's no good! Come sit with Nana!"

Natalie looked up as the hands grasping her shoulders pushed her away, only this time they belonged to Nick, and he was standing in the mirror looking out at her. Just behind him was the man she'd murdered. He was flanked by the two police officers she'd also murdered.

"You killed me," Nick said, his voice cold, accusing. "You killed me."

Jerking awake, she heard herself shout "No!" in a strangled voice. As she took in her surroundings, she added "Yes," in much softer tones for no reason in particular.

Her forehead was damp, and Natalie was about to scramble out of the bed when a damp cloth was shoved into her hands. She wasted no time scrubbing the moisture away from her neck and face. When she was finished, a dry towel replaced the dirty washcloth.

Natalie looked up and saw Janette lean back in a chair she'd obviously pulled closer to the bed. She sat with the covers gathered around her waist and regarded the other woman silently for several long moments. "You were mortal," she said finally, "the last time I saw you."

"So were you," Janette shot back evenly. She silently handed Natalie bottle of blood, which she took while trying to quell a small, ungrateful stab of resentment.

"I suppose I should thank you," Natalie said, her voice hard. She couldn't look at Janette. "But you shouldn't have bothered."

"Well I'm sure that can still be arranged," she said matter-of-factly. "There are at least half a dozen people here who would gladly stake you. Not as many as last night," she added with a shrug. "Jose is busily telling anyone who will listen who you are. He seems to think it'll protect you."

This was the old Janette, or something close to it, Natalie decided. Flippant, a bit cold and distant. But Natalie recognized that she did owe her something, even if she wasn't grateful for it at the moment. Had Janette not intervened, it would all be over by now. She'd be a pile of ash blowing across the city right now. Natalie laid back down against the pillows, thinking she should be dead, that she'd rather be dead.

"And, to answer your next obvious question," Janette continued, "the tape was probably just a rumor. At least no one's been able to track it down so far. Still, there'll have to be a few favors called in to the media." Janette's voice sounded bitter and disgusted.

Natalie listened dully as Janette talked, thinking that if things worked out, it wouldn't matter if they did have a tape. She wouldn't be around much longer to blackmail with it. But first she needed to know one thing.

"Janette?" she asked, her head cradled in the crook of her arm. "How did it happen?"

There was a pause, and Natalie knew that Janette understood exactly what she was asking. She already knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it for herself.

"I was wounded. Dying," Janette said softly. "I knew that Nicholas had rescued Patrick and Peggy. When he came back for me, he said he could save me too. I knew what he was saying, what he was offering, and I said no."

Natalie laid there, still as a statue, waiting for Janette to continue.

"I'm not even sure Nicholas knew what he was doing, but he brought me across.

He saved me, just as he promised." Not quite the same old Janette, Natalie thought, judging from the bitterness in her voice as she spoke, the unshed tears that colored every word.

But as she listened to the other woman speak, as she heard Janette's revelation, Natalie felt her heart break into a thousand tiny pieces.

"Nicholas brought me across even though it wasn't what I wanted because he couldn't let me go," Janette finished softly.

Natalie's throat was closing, something vile and angry was choking her as she laid there. "You. Tracy," she finally said, her voice weak and shaking. "Everyone except me." She couldn't even muster up any tears over it now; she'd cried herself out when she thought the asteroid was coming and she'd all but begged Nick to do it. When he'd refused her...at first she hadn't been able to believe what she'd heard. But she'd eventually convinced herself that he'd been right, that it went against everything Nick believed in about vampirism, that it was damnation not life.

In one sense he'd been right: this *was* hell.

Several months after that horrible Valentine's Day she realized that Nick was in love, but it wasn't *her* he was in love with. It had taken her some time to realize it, and she'd mostly stubbornly refused to acknowledge it. But it made sense, his declaration of love coming so shortly after the incident with the litovuterine. He was attempting to recapture something he felt he'd lost. When wasn't Nick trying to recapture something he felt he'd lost, she asked herself giving Janette a sidelong glance.

Time to face facts, she told herself. Nick had only loved her because she was mortal. She was his idealized icon of mortality. It hadn't even really mattered who she was as long as she *remained* mortal, even if the cost of that was her own life, Nick could content himself with knowing that she'd died untainted, clean of that curse. And after she was gone, there would be someone else to take her place, and another and another, a faceless line of women across time like a string of dazzling pearls.

She'd known it of course, convinced herself that she could accept that, that at least she would always have some part of him, even if it was only the part she could reach from up on her pedestal.

"You're here now," Janette reminded her quietly, though her words sounded hollow, incapable of providing comfort or reassurance.

"Where is he?" Natalie asked, her voice still tight and angry. "Gone. He never intended to bring me across," she said. "I'm a mistake, Sarah's right. He took too much, and then he left me for dead. He never loved me."

"If he had, he'd be mortal right now, is that what you're thinking?" Janette asked. Natalie silently nodded. "How do you know he's not?" Janette asked abruptly..

Natalie sat up. "Is he?" she asked breathlessly, hardly daring to hope.

Janette looked away. "I do not know. I had hoped you could tell me."

That deflated her. Natalie hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until Janette shook her head, then she sank back against the pillows in disappointment.

"It wouldn't matter if he were," Natalie said after a few moments.

"Mm, so I see," Janette said lightly, and Natalie glared at her. But she knew Janette was right, that she was fooling herself. It did matter. It would matter a lot to her, no matter what she said or thought. And Natalie couldn't ignore that tiny part of her heart that hoped it was so, for his sake, that some good came out of this parade of

horrors.

Natalie hated that part of her just then, willed it to remain silent and not bother her. She wanted to stay mad at him; she wanted to fan the tiny flame of anger and resentment in her heart until it became a huge, raging inferno.

Instead, she'd have to settle for mixed feelings.

With a sigh Natalie wondered if she'd ever manage to find some sense of equilibrium again. Not five minutes ago she'd been contemplating suicide yet again, and here she was now mad at hell as Nick and yet hoping for the best for him at the same time.

"Where is he?" she asked again, despairing at the desperate breaking of her voice.

Janette shook her head. "I don't know. He is still alive, that much I can tell, but the thread is very weak."

Natalie looked up at her, her expression suddenly very earnest. "When you find him," she began, choosing her words carefully. "When you find him, tell him I'm sorry."

When Janette turned and looked at her the expression in her eyes almost made Natalie's heart break anew. "I'm sorry too," she said. "I know what you were trying to do."

"I was a fool," Natalie said. "I thought he loved me."

Janette shifted, and moved to sit next to her on the bed. "I wish I could assure you that he does, but it's always so difficult to say with Nicholas. He believes he does these things out of love. I don't think he can see that they're motivated by selfishness. He has a view of how the world should be, and you and I are victims of that. He gave me eternity when I no longer wanted it and he'd rather have given you death when you wanted to live because it was how *he* thought the world should be." Janette paused and looked off into space for a moment. "LaCroix is the only one who has ever had the power to thwart Nicholas' plan for us all, and even he is not always successful." Then Janette looked back at her and said, "That's something to consider."

"What?" Natalie frowned.

"Don't let the bastards win," Janette said simply, but with enough venom that it made Natalie shiver just for a moment.

Natalie looked away. "It's not that simple," she said, passing a hand over her eyes. "I can't--I've killed three people already."

"I won't try to convince you that you are not to blame. You're too much like Nicholas in that respect," Janette began, reaching over and placing her fingers around her wrist, "But perhaps I can help you put it into perspective."

"There's nothing to put into perspective," Natalie said bitterly.

Janette opened her mouth to speak, then seemed to reconsider it. "Tell me about them," she said instead, her voice soft but insistent.

At first, all Natalie could do was look up at the other woman in horror, unable to believe what she was hearing. After several moments of tense silence, Janette continued. "The first one, where did you kill him?"

"Outside The Raven," Natalie said, then stopped herself. "Don't," she warned.

Janette leaned forward. "How long did you wait for him, or did you stalk him? Did you hunt him down" she asked. "How long did you play with him before you killed him?" Now her eyes were sparkling.

Shaking her head, Natalie glared at her. "That crap won't work with me," she

said. "I practically invented it!"

Janette sat back and blinked innocently at her. "I'm only trying to give you a sense of perspective," she said. "You don't have to tell me the details, but I can guess. You were hungry. You couldn't help it."

"No," Natalie said scowling trying not to think about how she'd rationalized it in exactly the same way just after it had happened. "I should have planned better."

Nodding her head slowly Janette seemed to contemplate this. "You're probably right," she said after a moment or two. "But what's done is done. We learn from it and we move on. We survive."

"I keep telling you it's not that simple," Natalie repeated.

"What is so complex about it? You killed someone." At Natalie's look, she said, "All right, you killed three someones. It's a tragedy, I'm not trying to trivialize it. But you have to recognize that circumstances played a part. You'd been left alone and you were *starving*! If you want to know the truth I'm amazed it wasn't worse than this," Janette said, genuine respect in her voice. "I know it hurts now." Janette hesitated, then added, "Remember what your brother was like."

Natalie flinched and tried to pull away from Janette, but the other woman held fast, waited until Natalie looked up at her again. "You are nothing like Richard was. Let that count for something."

Janette's words hurt her, yet at the same time offered her a vague sense of reassurance, which she attempted to immediately quell with her next words. "What about the police," Natalie asked. "They were just doing their job and..." She passed a weary hand over her eyes. "I should never have gone out."

Nodding, Janette released her. "Absolutely. And as soon as you get dressed, we'll get to the bottom of that." Without another word, Janette rose and waved her to the bathroom, then slipped out of the room.

Natalie watched her go, and gave serious thought to just throwing the covers up over her head and staying there for the night. But as tempting as that was, she had to get up, and so she quickly kicked the covers completely off her and laid there. She'd done this countless times in her old life, whenever she hadn't wanted to get up she'd toss the covers off herself and lay there until the chill drove her up and into the kitchen to make coffee.

No chill this time, though. To delay just a bit longer, Natalie idly looked down at her shoulder. The wound was more or less closed up, but it was bruised and discolored, a large purple welt against the paleness of her skin. Gently she probed it with her fingers and noted that it was tender. When she flexed her right arm it was stiff and she felt an uncomfortable pull on the bones and muscles. Natalie wondered if that would eventually go away or if it would always be there as a reminder.

On her way to the shower she found a pile of towels and clean clothes sitting on a chair outside the bathroom. Gathering up the towels she took a quick, hot shower, washing off the grime and blood from the night before, instantly feeling better as she did so.

Then she dried off, wrapped her hair in a thick towel and went out to examine the clothes. Wondering who had picked these out, Natalie went through them slowly. A large black t-shirt, a denim jacket, black leggings and pair of black sneakers. Natalie realized they were traveling clothes, meant to be dark, comfortable and nondescript all

at the same time.

Her hair was still damp and she draped a dry towel over her shoulders to absorb some of the water. She'd seen a hairbrush and a new toothbrush in the bathroom which had obviously been left for her and she made grateful use of them, drawing the brush through her damp hair until it was smooth and her scalp tingled. The mint of the toothpaste caused her to retch though, making brushing her teeth a thoroughly unpleasant experience.

Natalie realized all these trappings, these now meaningless rituals she'd performed nearly every day of her mortal existence were distracting her. Without realizing it, she'd obeyed Janette's instructions to join her and was acting as if getting to the bottom of the incident yesterday really mattered. You decided to go out into the sun, she told herself. She must not allow Janette to sidetrack her. All this grooming, all these old habits were just going to undermine her as she allowed herself to get comfortable. While some of what Janette had said had made sense, there was no changing the past. But she could prevent any future disasters.

The sun was up now. Could she go outside and be done with it?

There was only one way to find out. Natalie finished dressing, tossed the towel onto the chair heedless of the rivulets of water that darkened the shirt and exited the room. It took her a second to get her bearings since she was in a different part of the house, but she quickly found the wooden spiral staircase and began climbing, her eyes fixed intently on the now tightly closed door that led to the roof. There were several heavy locks and bolts on it; she could see them from where she stood, and she wondered if she'd be able to break them down.

That soon became a moot point, however. She was a little less than two dozen steps from her goal when a sense of panic began to set in; three more steps and it began overwhelm her to the point that she started shaking. With an effort she managed to lift first one foot, then the other and moved two steps closer to the door. Grasping the railing firmly with one had, she managed to pull herself up one more step.

And stopped. She absolutely, positively could not go on and was in fact, nearly paralyzed with fear. Blinking hard, Natalie looked at the door again and willed her body to move but her feet remained firmly rooted to the step she was currently standing on. I should be able to do this, she thought as despair flooded through her. The other day in The Raven she'd tried to do the same thing, and when she hadn't been able to go out she'd assumed it was because she was running mostly on instinct. Now that she was in control and rational, her body should be hers to control at will, not huddling in sheer terror against the wall.

The thought that her body had suddenly turned traitor on her, was acting totally on an instinct of its own that it shouldn't have at this time infuriated her, and she used that outrage to move one more step up. But the effort left her panting and nearly drained. Still she forced herself to move the other foot.

And that was it, that was as far as she could go, and in fact, stepped back down three or four steps before she could stop herself. Frustrated and angry, she leaned against the railing, her head bowed in her hands.

"Going somewhere?"

Startled, Natalie looked up. Both Janette and Jose stood on the steps just below her, concern readily apparent on both their faces.

"Obviously not." Natalie said bitterly, sinking down onto the nearest step. She twisted her head and looked up at the door. "I'll wait until tonight, go out somewhere where there's no shelter and wait for the sun." Her voice was shaking, she noted absently.

"It won't work," Jose told her sympathetically, moving to sit beside her. "The closer it gets to dawn, the more you'll be driven to seek shelter. You won't have a choice."

"It's always like this for the young ones, and it affects some of us more than others," Janette added. "Eventually you might be able to go out if you need to, though it will always be extremely difficult. For now..." Janette shook her head slowly. "If you want to commit suicide, this is not the way to do it."

Natalie thought about how Nick had gone outside a few times, even showing up for work in the middle of the day once. How hard that must have been, she marveled. If his reaction had been even a mild version of what she'd just experienced it must have been hell for him.

Natalie looked up at Janette and Jose. "Then what?" she asked. "What can I do?"

Jose took her hand. "Live," he said. "It's what we were built to do, whether we want to or not."

Janette rolled her eyes. "Darling, who writes your dialogue?" she asked, but there was an amused gleam in her eyes.

Jose ignored her, but sneaked a sidelong glance in her direction. "All I'm saying," he said, "is that we go on, we learn to cope. All our instincts are designed to help us to that end." Then he continued, his expression more solemn. "Suicide isn't the answer," he said. "And I think you know that."

Natalie still wasn't so sure, but she had to admit that Jose seemed to be certain, and maybe she ought to listen to him. Of all the strange characters she'd met since this nightmare had begun, he seemed like the only one who was genuinely concerned about her welfare. He'd tried to save her when the others wanted her dead. He'd tried to save her when she'd wanted *herself* dead.

"I have to warn you though," he said solemnly, leaning back against the step, and Natalie steeled herself for yet another ominous revelation. "An eternity spent missing your favorite foods is hell." He was so serious that it took Natalie a few moments to realize he was joking, and when she did, she gave a small laugh. "No, I'm serious," he continued. "Cheese. Whole milk. Fresh bread dipped in honey. I think the worst part about being a vampire is that even the *smell* of food, *any* food, makes me sick to my stomach."

Natalie laughed again, though a part of her recognized what he was trying to do; this was a ploy to distract her, and she had to admit it was working. "A good, sharp cheddar melted over homemade bread and an obscene amount of wine. And a young girl from the village to keep me warm was the best..." Jose said, his voice trailing off with an all too familiar faraway look in his eyes.

That made Natalie roll her eyes. Typical, she thought. Glancing down, Natalie saw that Janette was also lost in thought, a pained expression on her. Natalie wanted to ask her what she was thinking about, but realized that for all his kindness Jose was still a stranger and Janette might not want to reveal too much to him. So she contented herself

with catching Janette's eye, ignoring the small tear that sparkled in the corner, and just nodded slowly.

That seemed to pull Janette out of her reverie. "We all have things we miss, things that haunt us from time to time. But we can't afford to live in the past."

"Nick never understood that," Natalie observed, and was amazed that she'd never thought of it before. He spent so much time in the past, trying to escape from his past, yet it consumed him, held him back. Nick would never, ever really be free, Natalie suddenly understood.

But were any of them ever really free from their past, she reasoned. That's what Janette and Jose were trying to tell her, she realized. You couldn't erase or forget the past, but neither could you dwell there either or you'll never get anywhere, never find some small measure of peace.

But she was still unsure, and rested her head on her arms which she clasped together on her knees. "Nick told me once about a friend of his who committed suicide. How did she do it?"

She didn't need to look up to know that Janette and Jose exchanged quick, worried glances. "She went into the sun," Janette said finally. "I don't know how she did it, except that she must have truly wanted to die. She talked about it often enough. Most of us knew it was only a matter of time."

"Nick said she felt she couldn't contribute anything to the world anymore. Is that true?"

"Erika thought it was true," Janette said. "Whether it was really true or not, I can't say. She felt all she was doing was taking, not giving, and she said she'd rather die than become a burden."

Natalie was quiet for a moment, felt her heart beat once. It was the first time she'd noticed it. "I can't kill anyone else," Natalie said. "I'd rather die than let that happen again."

She was looking for reassurances, for someone to tell her that this would never happen again, that she would find some semblance of normalcy, whatever that was, again in time. She was looking for reassurances they couldn't give her. Natalie had always tried to be careful about that with Nick, always strived to keep things into perspective, to not make promises she might not be able to keep. You weren't always successful, a small voice in the back of her mind accused. No, but she had *tried* and that should have counted for something.

Instead, in the end, it had counted for nothing. Less than nothing.

That was the lesson Nick had taught her, she decided. Trust and faith and compassion were meaningless, empty things. You were better off without them because in the end they only got you into trouble. Maybe she should just give in, live the vampire high life, or at least some pale shadow of it on her meager resources. The thought came, unbidden: what better revenge to take against Nick.

There was a light touch on her shoulder, and she looked up slowly. She felt old, and weary to her bones. It must have shown too, because a worried look crossed Janette's face as she looked up at her.

"You've been through a lot in the last week. Give yourself some time and then make your decision." She paused, and looked away for a second, then back up as her eyes locked with Natalie's. "I know what it feels like, to have your whole world

suddenly ripped away. And I know what it's like to want to die. If it is truly what you want, then...I'll help you." The last was said reluctantly and was accompanied by a small gasp from Jose who was also now looking down at Janette aghast. But after a moment, he closed his eyes and nodded.

Natalie didn't know what to say and just blinked up at Janette, deciding that the offer made her feel terribly uncomfortable. She couldn't burden someone else with that responsibility, and yet she realized she probably didn't have much choice in the matter and would need Janette's help. For a moment she seriously considered taking Janette up on her offer. But she couldn't, much as she might want to; she was certain that if she was to die it would be by her own hand, not someone else's, not even someone driven by compassion. It was simply too much to ask.

"I'll wait," she said finally, softly. "I'll give it some time.

"Good," Janette said, her face relaxing slightly.

"But, I can't accept your offer, should it come to that," she added.

Janette nodded, accepting that without a word. "Lets go have a chat with Sarah, shall we?"

Jose rose and reached out to help her to her feet and the three of them made their way down the steps and onto the main level of the house. As had been the case the night before, a majority of the residents were preparing to go out. Natalie had no idea whether or not the club would be open for business. Nor did she have any idea where to find Sarah, but Jose obviously did. He led them diagonally across the main floor to a closed door and rapped loudly against it.

Natalie concentrated on listening to what might be behind the door. At first there was nothing. Then, after a few moments, Natalie was certain she heard footsteps, someone in slippers or very soft soled shoes, perhaps barefoot, tread carefully across the floor. From the sound of the steps, Natalie figured there was one large room behind the door, hardwood floor like the rest of the main floor, and very little furniture.

She heard a soft click as the door was unlocked and opened. Joanne stood before them, wrapped in an oversized silk bathrobe.

"Where's Sarah?" Jose asked. But Janette was obviously having none of that and simply swept past Joanne and into the main room before she could answer Jose's question. By the time she and Jose had pushed into the room, Janette was seated comfortably on the only sofa in the room, looking expectantly at Joanne.

"Please tell Sarah that I would like to see her immediately," Janette said.

The corners of Joanne's mouth twitched up into a cold smile as she quickly left, exiting through a pair of curtained French doors opposite the door to the main floor. While she was gone, Natalie took a moment to look around. The room was just as she'd expected given what she'd heard through the door. The floor was lightly colored wood, the walls a slight off white. Natalie noted that the room still had the smell of fresh paint in it, but had no idea if it had been painted recently or some time ago and her more acute senses were still picking up the traces. Not that it mattered, she told herself as she looked at the paintings that hung on the walls. She was certain one was a Georgia O'Keefe original. The other was a portrait of a man in his mid thirties, done in oils. Natalie thought he looked ill, and as she looked more closely at it she realized the paint wasn't yet quite dry on it. It had been done fairly recently.

Joanne returned just then. "Sarah says she'll see you now. Follow me." Natalie

turned from her examination of the painting to observe Janette. She had a very bad feeling about this little game of one-upmanship that Janette and Sarah were obviously engaged in as she got a quick look at the cold expression on Janette's face as she rose from the couch.

Wordlessly the three of them followed Joanne through the French doors into what was obviously a sitting room. Joanne paused at the door, and when Jose passed through behind her, Natalie heard her say, "Not you." When she turned, Natalie saw that Joanne had her palm resting flat against Jose's chest and was preventing him from entering the room. Her smile, though, was downright seductive. Natalie watched as Jose reached up and grasped her fingers, moving her hand away from him, but he glanced over at Janette for guidance, his eyes dark.

"It's all right, Jose. We won't be long," Janette said. From his expression, Natalie guessed Jose was not at all happy about being sent away, but did not question or argue with Janette. He simply nodded once, flashed her a quick, reassuring smile and was gone without a backward glance.

Sarah swept into the room just them. "Joanne," she said curtly. "Leave us."

Joanne obviously didn't need to be told a second time, though she did pause long enough to drop a small curtsy in Sarah's direction, which earned her a disapproving look, before exiting through the same door Jose had just used. Natalie could hear her laughing on the way out of the suite. Sarah ignored it, and gestured toward a low table surrounded by plush chairs and a loveseat situated against the wall. On the table were three wine glasses and a full bottle of blood.

Without preamble, Janette walked over and seated herself in one of the chairs, leaning back and crossing her legs. As if on cue, both Natalie and Sarah moved simultaneously to join her.

"I thought it was time we had a little talk," Sarah began, picking up the bottle and filling one of the glasses. She handed it to Natalie.

"I see you wasted no time establishing yourself," Janette said. "Did you at least have the courtesy to wait until after I left, or were you already setting up?"

Sarah did not react to that at all, and Natalie watched as she smoothly filled the remaining two glasses. "I've been here for some time," was her only comment. "But that's not what we're here to discuss," she added with a sidelong glance in Natalie's direction. "Later, if you like, I'll tell you all about it."

Natalie realized she was going to be, by and large, a passive observer in this little exchange. It didn't make her in the least bit happy, but she was out of her depth, had been out of her depth since all this had started, and Janette had a much better chance of getting any answers, of getting to the bottom of Sarah's game. And she didn't need to remind herself that the last time she'd attempted to regain some control over her life had ended in disaster. She was forced to trust Janette.

Janette nodded slowly. "It's not so easy, is it?"

"What?" Sarah almost snorted. "Running a club? You must be joking."

"Not that," Janette said, giving Sarah a studied look. "Looking after all of them. They all come to you with their petty grievances, their sorrows. Some of them want to earn your favor. All of them demand attention in some form or another. And they all rely on you to take care of things for them."

"Which I do," Sarah said, taking a sip.

"If they can pay your price," Janette said, and Natalie was startled by the coldness in her voice. "You have quite a reputation, you know. No free rides."

Sarah's glance flicked quickly across her, so rapidly that Natalie almost missed it. "You know as well as I do that establishments like...ours....don't come cheap. Am I supposed to just welcome them with open arms and tell them they can always rely on the goodness of my charity? You're not going to tell me that you did that? Because LaCroix certainly never did."

"There's a difference between you and I," Janette said evenly. "How many people are here paying off their debts to you, a debt you manipulated them into?"

Janette was becoming agitated, Natalie could clearly see it in her posture and the way she clipped her words. And one quick look at her expression convinced her she never wanted to be on the receiving end of her temper.

But that didn't seem to phase Sarah in the least, who merely laughed softly, though it was a forced, ghastly sound. Dead and empty and a complete facade, Natalie thought. "Taking in the strays," she said with a chuckle. "Yes, I'd heard that about you, but I didn't believe it."

"We all have a responsibility to the community," Janette said, visibly regaining control of her temper. Her voice had become calmer, lighter, and she seemed more relaxed.

"Ah yes," Sarah said. "Providing shelter and all that." Then she paused, and placed her glass down carefully on the table. "As it turns out, responsibility is the very thing I wanted to discuss with you," she said leaning back and steepling her fingers.

Natalie did not like the sound of that, and neither, she could tell, did Janette.

But before she could decide what she meant, Sarah continued. "I take my responsibilities more seriously than you might think, Janette." Then Sarah's gaze turned on her, and Natalie tried not to shift uncomfortably in her seat. "Take Natalie for instance," she said. Natalie tried not to glare at her. For her part, Sarah continued in the same mild tone. "I took her in, even when she was a danger to my patrons. I gave her blood."

"You allowed her to go out when you knew she did not have sufficient control."

"Nonsense," Sarah said. "*Jose* failed her in that regard, not me. He made that clear last night, to an entire roomful of people."

Janette shook her head. "Not good enough. This is your place, you have set yourself up in a position of responsibility, *you* are to blame for what happened last night. No one else."

"I took in a starving vampire. More importantly I took in Natalie Lambert. She wouldn't give her name, but I knew who she was. The doctor who found a cure for the fever, who's been covering for us." Sarah shook her head. "If *anyone* has been irresponsible in this matter, it hasn't been me, and there are plenty in the community who will back me up on that."

Natalie was already more than a little tired of being talked about as if she wasn't there The tension in the room was thick and uncomfortable, and when she cleared her throat loudly, both women focused their attention on her. Janette looked mildly annoyed that she'd interrupted, but there was no backing down now.

"What about last night?" she asked, her hand moving unconsciously toward the stake wound on her right shoulder.

"What about it?" Sarah asked flippantly. "I was attempting to take care of a problem. You were out of control."

"You panicked," Janette interjected. "Natalie had done something that didn't fit into your plans, so you decided to cut your losses and destroy her," she accused.

"I couldn't risk having her go off on a rampage. She killed police officers. She allowed police officers, and a number of other mortals, to see her. The Enforcers would have done exactly what I did last night." Janette had struck a nerve. That much was obvious to Natalie as she watched Sarah's body posture become stiffer, her tone defensive

Sarah continued. "And just why was she running loose, killing homeless people before Joanne found her? Who brought her across then left her to fend for herself? Who didn't live up to his responsibilities?"

There it was. The point Sarah had been driving toward throughout the entire conversation, particularly since the whole issue of responsibility had come up. Natalie instantly began berating herself for not having seen it sooner, for not having thought of it. She'd been an idiot, she realized. She'd failed to ask the right questions. Hell, she'd failed to ask *any* questions. Instead, she'd allowed herself to fall into a virtual hornets nest of trouble, more so than she usually did. At least with Nick she'd had *some* idea of what she'd been getting into. Though she'd had her doubts about Sarah, Natalie suddenly felt blindsided by her own stupidity and lack of vision. Jose had had the right idea in telling everyone who she was. Natalie had assumed that anonymity would somehow protect her, give her some time when in fact her silence had given Sarah time to start honing it into a weapon. Add that to the list of things that made her a fool, Natalie thought, the knowledge sending a sharp pang of recrimination through her.

When she looked over at Janette, she was sitting there calmly, completely unsurprised by Sarah's words, though Natalie knew she must have reached the same conclusion about Sarah's motivations. At least what Natalie had guessed at so far. Who knew how deep and how far Sarah's manipulative streak ran?

"That's your game then, is it?" Janette said. "Take Natalie in, play the good Samaritan. Eventually reveal how you helped the one who cured the plague to everyone for the points. Let her go out, maybe run into a little trouble, let her see what a big, bad world it is out there so she'd come running back to you for help and protection." Janette paused and leaned forward slightly in her chair. "But you miscalculated, didn't you? There was more than a little trouble last night, wasn't there?"

Natalie suddenly straightened. "My keys and wallet. You put them on the body so the police would be looking for me. You were hoping someone would spot me and there'd be trouble." Natalie couldn't believe the words as they poured out of her mouth, but it was the only thing that made any sense. Everything was falling into place and Natalie suddenly felt sick to her stomach. "Oh my God," she said, fixing Sarah with a confused stare. "Why?"

"You didn't expect it to get that out of hand," Janette said, rising abruptly from her chair and pacing quickly back and forth. "When that happened you panicked and decided to destroy her. So that everyone would thank you for taking care of the problem before they became too suspicious of you."

Sarah sat there watching the two of them, her face frozen into a cold smile.

"You're after Nick," Natalie said slowly. "I should have seen...You didn't ask me

any questions. I should have figured it out."

Sarah stood and walked over to stand in front of Janette. "This is a fascinating fiction, Janette. But you're avoiding the real issue. You talk so prettily about responsibility, how we all have a responsibility to the community." Sarah's voice was almost sweet, there was a smile on her lips. "Are they just words, or do you really mean it?" Then Sarah turned her head slightly and looked over at Natalie. "She's innocent. She's *his* victim." Looking back at Janette, she whispered, "You know what has to be done about him."

The silence began to get on Natalie's nerves after the first thirty seconds. Janette remained silent for a moment or two longer. Natalie imaged she was having some great war with herself, some mental battle wherein she tried to figure out just what card to play. For her part, Natalie wanted to play the "beat a hasty retreat and figure out your options" card but she somehow suspected that Janette would discard that one from the pile right away.

"Now who's making up fiction?" she asked. "You're jumping to conclusions."

It was something of a desperate ploy, a bluff. Natalie couldn't have hoped to pull that one off--lying had never been one of her strong suits. She'd only recently discovered that there was an art to lying by omission and she didn't do it particularly well. It had become a necessity though, once Nick had entered her life. Once she'd learned the truth about vampires.

Janette on the other hand was probably quite adept at bluffing, particularly to get herself out of a sticky situation. Some of her old posturing was there, the regal bearing that demanded that you pay attention to and obey her. Not as much as there had been before Robert, but Janette had had enough experience with it that the necessary body language and inflections were easily relearned. Sarah seemed only marginally affected by it. She'd been more affected when her position had been less firm, when she'd been standing on shakier ground.

"Am I?" Sarah asked. "I know more about her than you might think. Considering who she is and her present circumstances, it doesn't take much of an educated guess to figure out who did it."

Another long silence from Janette, and Natalie debated with herself over whether or not she should jump in, since it was so obvious that her fate was partially at stake. Not as much as last night, but it was still at issue, and Natalie loathed her exclusion from the discussion. She felt like something insubstantial being buffeted around by gusts of winds, all blowing in different direction. She had no clear course in mind, and if there was one thing she hated, it was not having a clear path mapped out for her. Nothing so explicit that it didn't afford some flexibility--hell, flexibility she could handle, considering the fact that she could handle the existence of vampires without the barest blink of an eye. It had been critical then, when Nick had come to life on her table, but that was child's play compared to this. Then it had been Nick. Now it was still about Nick--when wasn't it about Nick--but she was looking at it from the other side, as a member of the vampire community, an extremely frightening and alien perspective.

There was a subtle shift in Sarah's demeanor and attitude. Natalie watched as she became shuttered and realized Sarah had given them all the information she was going to give and now they would have to wait and watch the episode unfold around them. Janette saw it too, Natalie realized. It was obvious in the way her gaze flicked across the

other woman, over to Natalie. But she tried anyway.

"You've called the Enforcers, haven't you?" Janette said, venomously. "That's been your plan all along."

But Sarah had moved past cooperating, and simply returned to her seat and picked up her glass. Natalie wanted to stalk over there and slap the glass from her hand, strangle Sarah with her bare hands for what she had done. Anger and genuine hatred over being used and exploited and manipulated burned through her with a white hot intensity, starting in the middle of her chest and radiating outward until her whole body trembled.

"Natalie!" Janette's voice was sharp, and for a moment Natalie almost turned on her.

And then stopped dead in her tracks.

She'd risen, she hadn't even realized it, and was standing over Sarah, her now descended fangs pressing strangely against her upper lip. Without being aware of it, she had turned her internal turmoil and hatred and despair outward and had gone on the offensive, sought to strike out and destroy the thing that was at least superficially at the center of her pain.

She'd been ready to kill Sarah without a second thought.

"Do you see what I mean?" Sarah asked, her expression nonplused, as she glared up at Natalie from her seat. She hadn't moved as Natalie had advanced on her; there was no fear in her, just outrage and hostility.

"Oh, what did you expect?" Natalie spat at her, ignoring Janette's quiet warnings to calm down. She was angry. She was hurt and tired beyond belief. She was becoming something she couldn't comprehend. And she simply couldn't take any more. "Is there any compassion in you?" she demanded. "Or is everything you see measured in terms of opportunity? I have lost everything in the past week. Everything. My friends. My self control. My *life*!" As she spoke, Natalie ticked the items off emphatically on her fingers. "And that means absolutely nothing to you except as something to exploit." Natalie stopped and drew a breath, standing rigidly in the center of the room. "How do you live with yourself?" she asked.

Janette seemed interested in an answer to that one, too, as she looked over with an expectant expression on her face. For her part, Sarah just looked up at her, a cool expression on her face. "I suppose I should be outraged," she began. "But I'm not." Her expression softened slightly. "You're obviously very unstable. It happens sometimes and under the circumstances it's hardly surprising."

That did it. Natalie knew that that Sarah wanted her to get angry and possibly lose control again. And she got her wish. The anger, so recently quelled, raced through her with renewed ferocity and she lunged forward, intent on reaching Sarah. But Janette was suddenly between her and Sarah, holding her almost painfully by the shoulders. Natalie felt an awful twinge from the stake wound, and pulled up sharply, intent on dodging Janette to at least get a good slap in. But Janette held fast.

"It's what she wants," Janette said insistently. "Don't let the bastards win, remember?" Natalie heard her words, a part of her understanding what she was saying and another part of her rejecting it entirely. The second part won out, but only for a moment as she was overcome by a strange current that seemed to run throughout her body. It was as if someone had run a string down the center of her, pulled it taut and

was now plucking at it, making it vibrate and resonate within her. As she stooped to catch her breath she felt a sense of calm wash over her and through her, diminishing and receding until Natalie felt very still inside.

Looking over into Janette's blue eyes Natalie knew instantly that the sensations had come from her and opened her mouth, Sarah completely forgotten as a string of questions formed, ready to pour out. She was aware of the other woman in all the usual ways, as a physical, tangible presence, but there was a mental representation of her as well, a strange, deep psychic connection and Natalie had absolutely no idea precisely where it originated from.

"Later," Janette said softly, and Natalie knew she was anticipating the questions that she would inevitably ask. Nodding, she allowed Janette to steer her gently from the room, feeling Sarah's eyes boring into her back all the way.

Out the curtained French doors, through the sparse waiting room, out into the main floor of the house. Natalie could feel Janette's fingers around her upper arm, neither pushing nor pulling. Simply guiding. Natalie didn't know what she would have done if Janette hadn't stepped in. If Janette hadn't suddenly appeared here at all. She'd have to remember to thank her one of these days.

She scanned the immediate area and saw no sign of Jose, but when she looked up, he was standing on the steps near the door to the roof, waiting for them expectantly.

"I heard every word," he said apologetically.

Janette merely nodded mutely and continued up past him, pushing the door, now unlocked and unbolted because the sun had set, open with her hand and stepping out onto the roof.

"I'm sorry," Natalie said as soon as they stood together in the open air. Several other groups were clustered around the roof, talking, laughing. All of them turned to stare at the trio for a moment as they moved out onto the roof, then quietly, unobtrusively, they withdrew, leaving the three of them alone. Natalie realized they didn't want to be guilty by association and so they were avoiding her and Janette like the plague. She felt instantly sorry for Jose--he'd been dragged unwittingly into this simply because of his kindness.

"I know," Janette said sympathetically. "Believe me, I didn't particularly enjoy stopping you. Except that she would have torn you to pieces."

Natalie nodded. "I was angry...I didn't mean to attack her. It just...happened." Her voice was breaking in that pitiful way that she hated again. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it," she observed shakily. "Always on the edge of control but never quite having it."

"Only if you keep striving to be something you're not," Janette said. "That was Nicholas problem. And it will be yours too if you try to be like him." She turned and walked to the edge of the roof, looking out at the city. "Our control comes from accepting who and what we are."

"Know your enemy," Natalie said. It was something she'd thought of in Nick's treatment, but had never dared to express openly, knowing exactly how badly he would take it. So she'd sought her answers in quiet observation, empirical data, and careful questions.

Janette turned and fixed her with a strange look. "That's not exactly how I'd put it," she said after a pause. "But I suppose it can be thought of in that way."

Licking her lips, Natalie glanced quickly over at Jose, who stood off to the side studying her. "What was that, downstairs?" she asked.

Janette was choosing her words carefully, Natalie could tell. It was wrong of her to ask in front of Jose, but she *had* to know. Hopefully, Janette would be able to find a way to tell her without giving away any of her own secrets.

"Children of the same bloodline have a connection. What did you feel?"

"A vibration," Natalie answered without hesitation. "In here," she said, gesturing to her chest. "Then I just felt calm and still." She shrugged. "Then I had a lot of questions."

"I wasn't sure if it would work. The further removed two vampires are from the source, the weaker the connection. My blood must have strengthened it temporarily."

Janette was giving her what she could, Natalie knew, and the rest would have to wait until they were alone again. But Natalie knew there was no distance between them. Both she and Janette were of the exact same bloodline, Nick's bloodline. And she'd used the word "children"; they were sisters in a sense, just as Nick and Janette, as the children of LaCroix, had been siblings...

The thought nearly made her gag when she considered the implications. Nick and Janette...

"Some training is involved," Janette continued, but there was a quick, amused quirk of her eyebrows as she sensed Natalie's thought process and reaction. "A new vampire has to be taught to look for and recognize it, for the most part. But the connection is always there and can be used, in certain circumstances, to influence even the uninitiated."

"Strong emotions?" Natalie asked, recovering herself quickly.

"Leading to the loss of control," Janette finished.

Natalie thought about that. "It makes sense," she said after a moment. "You'd want some mechanism for controlling new vampires. An instinctive component of the connection is a natural way to do that. Then it can be refined through learning and training." Her mind turned over the implications of that, of what it meant in terms of vampire evolution, and in terms of her own relationship, or lack thereof, to Nick, Janette and distally even to LaCroix.

Outwardly, that thought made her shudder ever so slightly.

But deep in some part of her, a part she tried desperately to quiet because she simply couldn't deal with these emotions right now, she found a strange comfort in it. For the first time in many years, since even before Richard had died, she was beginning to feel like she was part of something. Part of a family maybe? A bloodline or a heritage, certainly a connection that she had completely lost when Richard had died and Sarah had taken Amy away to stay with Sarah's family. Taken Amy away from her. She hadn't realized until this moment how much she resented Richard's wife for that.

Natalie struggled to shut those feelings off. It was too soon, and this was all too new and frightening and strange for her to even be harboring thoughts of having a significant and permanent place within it. But it was there nonetheless, and it had taken root firmly enough that it wouldn't go away, so firmly that for the time being she didn't even allow the incredibly incestuous nature of it bother her, despite her discomfort before.

For the moment she had Janette. In time, she would have Nick as well.

"What about the Enforcers?" Jose interrupted, drawing her back to the present. She looked to Janette. "She must have called them."

"Enforcers?" Natalie asked, as Janette nodded.

"Nick never told you?" Janette asked, exasperation evident in her voice. "Idiot," she muttered under her breath. "You'd think he'd at least have the decency to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" Natalie asked.

Janette looked up at her. "We're all responsible for keeping our existence a secret from mortals," Janette began. "But, from time to time, things get out of hand. Some of us are not as careful as we should be."

"And when that happens, the Enforcers come and clean up the mess?" Natalie asked.

"Yes. Their role is a difficult one to define, and they like to keep it that way. It gives them a larger leash, as it were. Mostly they step in when a mortal has evidence of vampires and intends to use it." Janette paused for a moment. "But I've seen them just outright kill mortals who knew our secret for no good reason other than to teach our kind a lesson. They're very powerful, they act swiftly often without the need to face the consequences, and if they're coming here, we have an enormous problem on our hands."

"You think Sarah called them. What did Nick do to her?"

"Nothing, as far as I know," Janette said. "But he has so many skeletons in his closet it's hard to say."

Natalie walked a few paces past Janette and stared out at the city. "I won't cooperate with them," she said after a few moments. "They can't make me tell them anything, can they?" As had been the case when she'd still been mortal, protecting Nick and his secrets was paramount. Everything, including her own safety and integrity took a back seat. A part of her cringed from the fact that she was still doing it even now, but it was instinct. Of all the souls she'd ever encountered, Nick's needed protecting more than any other she had met, and the habit was hard to break even after all he had done to her.

"Natalie, you don't know what you're dealing with," Jose began gently. "They can force you, and they will. They'll take what they want from your blood." He shook his head slowly. "It's better just to tell them the truth. They know when we lie to them."

She wanted to ask Jose how the Enforcers would know the truth from a lie, but now wasn't the time. "We have to run then," she said emphatically. "If they're on their way we have to get out of here now." It seemed so obvious to Natalie--get the hell out of Dodge, not quite by sundown but soon enough after to get a substantial head start. It seemed the only logical course of action at the moment; escape from the mess things had become by running, especially if it meant keeping Nick safe for a time.

This time both Janette and Jose shook their heads. "You cannot run or hide from the Enforcers. It only makes things worse when they catch you."

"How do you know?" she demanded, pacing. "Are you basing this on legend and hearsay, or on hard evidence that you've seen with your own eyes?"

There was silence for a moment from them, then Jose shrugged. "I've just heard stories," he said, turning to Janette. "You?"

"Well," Janette began. "Awful stories. Who wants to take the chance that they might be true?" she added. "But that's beside the point. They do have power, even if a portion of it is based on legend at the moment. I don't want to be the one who forces

them to assert themselves as more than just figureheads. And I won't allow you to try it either. Let Sarah be the one to play dangerous games, to gamble with people's lives, not you."

"So we just sit around and wait for them?" Natalie asked accusingly.

"It won't be long," Jose said.

Natalie paced the length of the roof twice, then looked down at Janette. "What else?" she asked.

"About the Enforcers?" At Natalie's nod she shrugged. "There isn't that much more to know. We break the rules and don't take care of it, they arrive. The offending vampire and any involved mortals are killed or never heard from again."

"How long have there been Enforcers?"

"Always," Janette said, looking at her as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head.

"Is there some kind of record?"

"No." Janette shook her head thoughtfully.

"Let me guess. It's part of the propaganda," Natalie said.

"It's just a fact."

Natalie decided to try another approach. "How are Enforcers chosen?"

Again, Janette shrugged. "I don't know."

As she turned to Jose and opened her mouth he held up his hands in surrender. "I don't know either. "

"Haven't you ever wondered?" Natalie asked. "Haven't you ever *asked*?"

"It never seemed like a good idea to ask too many questions about the Enforcers," Jose said. "Who knows? They might...drop by to find out why you're suddenly so curious."

"How do they know to show up? Do they spy on you?"

"No," Jose said, shaking his head sadly. "We spy on each other."

"So, they're not objective observers," she said, turning away and again walking across the roof, thinking aloud. "It's not a very good way to run a police force. There's a lot of potential for abuse of the system. They'd be better off setting up their own independent information network."

"I'll be sure to take notes, then," Janette said sarcastically. "I'm sure they'll be grateful for your insights into how they do business."

Natalie ignored her. "So we know Sarah called them about me, and presumably about Nick. Obviously she expects to gain something from it. Something tells me she's not the good Samaritan type." She could feel the wheels spinning, feel her mind wrapping around a puzzle to be solved, and took just a moment to bask in the sense of relief it brought with it. She glanced up at Janette. "You're sure she and Nick don't know each other?"

"I'm not sure," Janette replied quickly. "You know how he is. He tends to have several in every port."

"'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' is that it?" Jose asked from where he'd perched on the railing, his dark features in silhouetted against the lights of the city.

"A simple revenge plot?" Natalie asked. "Does Sarah seem the type?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Jose said, though she could hear the doubt in his voice. "Sarah isn't likely to take a lover unless it's someone she can control and manipulate.

Someone she can use to her advantage."

"Maybe Nick was the one that got away?" Natalie asked.

"He's singularly gifted in that respect," she heard Janette whisper under her breath.

"I doubt it. Just from what I know about him, I doubt Sarah would have ever touched him with a ten foot pole. Probably because of LaCroix."

"Questions, questions, questions! This doesn't serve any purpose," Janette interrupted, throwing up her hands. "We can stand here all night trying to figure out who, what, why, when and where, and the Enforcers will still come."

"Maybe," Natalie said quietly. "But I have to know why this is happening. And maybe, just maybe, if I know why, we'll find an out. I deserve to be punished for what I did to those men." Her voice was trembling slightly as she spoke, had taken on a hoarseness from the intensity as she stood over Janette. "I murdered them. But I'm not about to let anyone gain from it if I can help it. And 'why' is an important means to that end."

She had to sit down, as her emotions and memories were all bubbling to the surface again, threatening her control. Her limbs felt heavy and it was like they didn't belong on her body, like they belong to someone else. They obeyed her commands, but slowly, reluctantly, as she moved to sit next to Jose on the edge of the roof, and tried not to flinch as his arm slipped around her shoulders. It was a gesture meant to give comfort and reassurance, but it made Natalie feel trapped, even though she knew Jose meant well

It was then that she remembered the one question she hadn't asked. "Jose, how did you know who I was?" The question diverted them away from the puzzle of Sarah's motives, but Natalie figured a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. And it would give Janette a little time to ponder just why she seemed to think those motives were so important.

Jose looked at her curiously for a moment, then dropped his eyes to the roof. "Did you know Screed?"

"We met once," Natalie said softly, shaking her head. "Was he your friend?"

Jose shook his head. "Actually, I hated the bastard," he said, looking up and fixing her with a grin. "Damn carouche. Couldn't understand a word he said half the time." The grin slipped. "He got sick. And you came to take care of him."

Natalie nodded. "There wasn't much I could do. By the time I got to him, it was too late."

"I know," Jose said. "Vachon told me you did everything you could. And that it was you who found the cure."

"You knew Vachon?" she asked, staring up at him incredulously.

"For nearly two-hundred years," Jose said. "He was a good friend. He was the one who told me about you. He said he always meant to stop by and thank you, but I guess he never did. No one thanked you."

"Well," Natalie said looking away. "I can't take all the credit. LaCroix was the one who actually found the answer."

"And didn't know it. Until you pointed it out to him," Jose insisted. "You figured it out. You got us the type of blood we needed and worked out the dosage. And for your protection no one was to ever know what you'd done for us. But some of us knew. And vampires are worse gossips than mortals, I'm afraid."

"So I gather," Natalie said, rolling her eyes. Then she looked up at him, and their eyes locked. "You got sick, didn't you?"

"Yes I did," Jose said solemnly, his gaze never leaving her. He didn't even blink for several long seconds. "But I'm feeling much better now, thank you."

She knew that look. Nick had looked at her that way; she'd caught it a few times when he'd thought she wasn't looking, or he was just in a particularly bubbly mood and wasn't paying attention. And he'd walked around obviously lost in that fog during Valentine's Day last year. She sighed inwardly. "You have lousy timing," she said before she had time to think about it.

His lips curled in a light smile as he shrugged. "I've never had any complaints before" he said softly.

"Oh, please!" Janette exclaimed from across the roof where she stood.

Natalie wanted to jump up and thank her for interrupting. She liked Jose, she really did. But his timing was so bad. She wasn't ready for this, couldn't possibly deal with it at the moment, no matter how kind he seemed. Why on earth he felt such an urgency to make a move on her when they had eternity was beyond her. It had to be that damned, awful syndrome where patients thought they were in love with their doctors because they saved them. Just her luck.

Janette's words seemed to snap him out of his fog as well, as he lowered his eyes and looked away from her. "I'm sorry," she heard him mutter, the words just barely reaching her ears above the noise of the city.

Time to get back to their current, more significant problem, Natalie thought. She began by working through the pieces they had. "Sarah takes me in, plants my wallet and keys." She broke off as a thought occurred to her. "An anonymous tip. We get them all the time. Oh, geez, and the MO on the body in The Raven matches several unsolveds on the books. No wonder they called for backup last night. The must think I'm some kind of serial killer."

"Maybe they think you killed Nick and hid his body somewhere," Janette offered. At Natalie's aghast look she added, "I'm sure you considered it from time to time. I did."

"She's been very careful, you know," Jose said. "I listened to your conversation with her. Everyone in the house was listening. She planned it that way, and she didn't say anything that would incriminate her."

"But it all makes so much sense," Natalie said. "She wants the Enforcers after Nick. We just don't know why." They were missing pieces of the puzzle, and because of that, there was no way to get a complete picture. But she was good at figuring out the shapes of the missing pieces, and the part of the picture that was on them. "OK, she either has a grudge against Nick and is out for revenge, or she's got some other agenda in mind. Any thoughts as to what that might be?"

"I keep telling you it doesn't matter," Janette said, walking over to stand only a foot or two away from her. "You'd do better to spend your time deciding what you're going to tell them about Nicholas and the incident yesterday."

Why is she acting this way when she has the most to hide, Natalie wondered. Of all of them, she would have figured that Janette was the last person who would want to stand up to an inquisition of any sort. Unless it was true and Janette had truly never thought to question the Enforcers in anything, seemingly more intent on avoiding them all together. Or dealing with the question of how to handle them rather than why one

should when the occasion arose.

She had a point. Natalie had to admit. What was she going to say to them? Somehow she didn't think a quick sorry was going to cut it with them, and rightly so. But she was still certain that the whole question of how to answer them was tied in with why they were there in the first place.

And at the moment she had no idea what that was, nor how she might find out. It wasn't helping that both Jose and Janette were sidetracking her. But perhaps they cold use the Enforcers to help them find Nick, then do some fast talking. Natalie wished she knew more about them, particularly that whole bit about them knowing if they were lying. Now there was a mechanism to speculate about. But she doubted that her two companions had given the matter any thought. You had to admire the Enforcers, Natalie thought. They seemed to have the entire vampire community spit scared of them, which was, of course, something to consider in dealing with them. She wasn't so concerned about herself, but there was Jose and Janette, and Nick to consider. To say there was a lot at stake was an understatement.

She still didn't understand why they shouldn't just run away, but both Janette and Jose seemed dead set against it. She couldn't very well set out on her own. The events of the last two days were proof enough of that, she decided. So far being a vampire was not at all what it was cracked up to be, and having to exist like this while on the run from the entire vampire community was not her idea of a great way to spend eternity.

Natalie didn't have time to ponder the question or the facts any longer because the door to the stairwell opened and Dave stepped out onto the roof.

"They're here," he said. "Come with me."

It seemed to Natalie, considering the way both Janette and Jose seemed to regard them, that they should have arrived with a great deal more ominous fanfare. She'd pictured them alighting with great drama on the roof, their power evident in their stance and their auras. Instead, she felt like they'd sent an errand boy out to fetch her. Wordlessly she exchanged glances with Jose and Janette who both silently moved to follow Dave down into the building. She fell in behind them. As she passed him at the door, Dave leaned forward suddenly and hissed loudly in her ear, baring his fangs at her. She flinched away quickly, then stopped to stare at him for a moment. He seemed taken aback by her open stare, her shocked expression, and looked away quickly. "Inside," he said gruffly.

Dave lead them down a few flights of stairs. "You," he said pointing to Jose, "Wait in there."

They were going to keep them separate and question them individually, Natalie realized. That was actually smart as it gave them less time to agree on a story and was a good psychological mechanism to make them more nervous. They must have a lot of practice with interviews, she thought.

Several floors down, Dave ushered Janette into a room, and Natalie saw that it was much plusher and more nicely furnished than the room he put Jose in. It made her wonder just how she was going to fare, considering Dave's open animosity toward her.

She was right. Dave put her in what was basically a large closet. It had a single wooden chair and a bare light bulb and it was incredibly cliche, she thought. He locked the door behind him when he left, too.

Wondering if she could hear them, Natalie stood near the door and listened

carefully. She could hear most of the occupants of the house, and the sounds and routines of the inhabitants were familiar enough to her that she thought she could pick out something unusual. But there was nothing. Which meant that wherever they were, they were in a very private room, probably the one she and Janette had used last night. Natalie hadn't realized until she woke up this morning that it was soundproofed.

So there was nothing to do but wait, she thought. Wait and pace and think.

Which she did. She walked around the chair so many times she was certain she'd worn a path in the floor, all the time turning over all the little details about Sarah and the Enforcers that she had in her mind. Had Nick ever told her anything that might relate back to Sarah, might provide the link? Mentally, she reviewed the things Nick told her and came up empty.

It hadn't been in his blood either, she thought, then stopped dead in her tracks. Where had *that* come from? Natalie blinked and concentrated on the tiny thread of memory. She'd gotten Nick's blood, when he'd bit her, she realized. Why hadn't she ever considered that until now? What did she remember about that? Had she gotten some of his memories?

It was hazy, she realized. She could remember the events right before pretty well, had a vague impression of the moment he bit her, mostly that it had hurt, but after that it was kind of a blur. She'd seen Janette, she thought. Trying to remember it made her feel strange and uncomfortable, the memories both violent and intimate... And it meant he'd gotten even more from her since he'd taken more blood. And that didn't make her feel comfortable at all, she decided.

But as far as she could remember, which wasn't saying much, Sarah hadn't been among them. Thought it was important Natalie couldn't bring herself to try to focus on that brief exchange of memories any further, as a knot formed deep in the pit of her stomach. That gave credence to the idea that she was part of a faceless parade of women in Nick's life, that there was nothing to separate her, make her special.

It shouldn't bother her, she chided herself, resuming her pacing. It shouldn't matter. She'd known or at least suspected about the other women, particularly Janette. It had been going on all during the time they'd been working on a cure. Some of them she could forgive: Alyce, Anne Foley, Emily Weiss. There had been nothing but friendship between them then. When she'd felt a pang of jealousy toward the other women she tried to keep it to herself. But after Valentine's Day? Being forced to play that ridiculous charade mandated by LaCroix and Nick, knowing he was again spending substantial amounts of time with Janette, that he was slipping away from her had all begun to take its toll on her. Then there'd been the incident with Marian Blackwing. It had all hurt like hell. It still hurt like hell. She'd felt shut out, cut off. Afraid and more lonely than she could ever remember feeling in her life. To have his devoted attentions, his touch, his kisses for that brief time, something she'd only dreamed about, only to have it snatched brutally away ostensibly for her own good, left an aching void inside her.

She'd started working a lot more and sleeping a lot less, shunting her pain and forced silence into work to keep her mind and heart occupied. It had only partially worked. A part of her had noted with horror her sometimes harsh manner with Nick and knew it was her own disappointment and loneliness striking out at him with textbook passive-aggressiveness. There were so many times she regretted lying to him, wanted to

tell him she remembered everything. It had seemed like the only solution to set them all free at the time, and it was a terrible irony that it became her prison.

But she couldn't. She'd been afraid he'd try to run from her, from the things he'd said and done to her that night. She'd been afraid that LaCroix would decide to exact his revenge, or worse yet attempt again to take the memories from her and this time succeed. For as unhappy and isolated as the knowledge made her feel, they were *her* memories and nobody had a right to take them. Not LaCroix, and certainly not Nick, and even though she loved him despite that there was a part of her that would never forgive him for trying to erase the memory of that time.

There had been no way out, she'd realized. She'd trapped herself in misery by her own cleverness and stubbornness, and could only keep on loving him, keep working on the cure to set him free so that whole horrible episode would cease to be a barrier between them.

With a groan Natalie rubbed her eyes. This was getting her nowhere. And distracting her from the real problem at hand. She didn't have enough answers, and she'd waited too long to ask important questions that might have led to those answers. And now what? Any moment they were going to come for her, ask her a lot of questions about Nick and about the people she'd killed. And then? What would they do to her. What would they do to Nick?

It all made her head spin, and she suddenly realized she'd simply have to ad lib her way through this interview and hope for the best. Obviously they didn't know where Nick was or they'd have just dealt with him directly. So they needed her for that at least, which might or might not be a good thing.

And there was Janette to consider as well, Natalie realized. She owed it to her to protect her secret at all costs. She had no doubt that Janette's brief mortality and the manner in which it had been achieved would not be welcomed news to the vampire community. And Natalie also doubted that Janette wanted the world to know that she was once again technically a fledgling. Whatever happened, she would have to be especially careful with her answers. Janette had trusted her with that information, had proven to be a good ally and her presence made Natalie feel safe. To the best of her ability Janette's secret would be safe with her. She'd see to that.

She was still pondering the link between Sarah and Nick when the door scraped and then swung open abruptly. Her heart sank as she realized it was her turn. They must have finished with Jose and Janette, she thought.

But when she looked up the world seemed to freeze, to stop dead on a dime.

LaCroix stood framed in the door, his eyes full of cold hatred as he stood there glaring at her silently.

Natalie shivered involuntarily under the weight of those eyes. Funny, she'd never noticed how icy blue they were, or how dark and ominous his eyebrows were. At the moment, furrowed across his forehead they reminded her of stormclouds. She was silent; she couldn't have said anything, even if she'd wanted to. Any greeting, any words of any sort died on her lips beneath the intensity of his scrutiny. She leaned against the brick wall lightly for support, feeling a sudden surge of vertigo overtake her.

"So," he began. "It's true, then. You managed to survive."

She nodded, wishing desperately that she could rid herself of the lump in her throat. As frightened as she'd been of him at times when she'd been mortal, she was

absolutely petrified of him now. His presence made her want to huddle in the corner, curl up into a tight fetal ball and pray that he went away soon. It was as if he was filling her with an awful chill, a cold and metallic coldness that froze the better part of her soul. There'd been no time to consider how she'd deal with this, she realized. Natalie could only guess that his intense hatred of her stemmed from being forced to deal with the Enforcers. But if he was here, then where was Nick? Had LaCroix shown up in his stead? She looked up at him, opened her mouth to start the stream of questions that was on the tip of her tongue. And stopped.

LaCroix didn't move, didn't even change facial expression, but she knew asking him anything was absolutely futile. He wasn't going to answer any of her questions. He didn't utter another word to her. Instead, silently he turned and left, closing the door firmly behind him. Natalie heard the lock click back into place.

She stood there in the corner, staring at the blank wood of the closed door for several long minutes. The air around her was still and quiet, and if she allowed herself, she might be able to convince herself that she'd imagined it. That he'd never been there at all.

But he had been. She could still feel his presence like a cold, soft breeze, the kind you barely noticed unless you concentrated on it, and then when you did you realized it was slowly chilling you right through skin and muscle and bone, right down to the marrow. In response to these somber thoughts, Natalie shivered abruptly, then resumed her steady pace round and round the chair in the center of the room.

Yet another wrinkle, one she pondered in relation to all the other wrinkles. This situation was getting more complicated by the minute, and just as she began to grasp at the thin threads that would make all of this sensible, something new appeared to snatch them away from her and hopelessly tangle them. Maybe Janette had been right; maybe she'd be better of if she thought about what she was going to say to them when they came for her.

It wasn't too much longer before she heard the lock slide back and the door again swung open. This time, however, there was no sign of LaCroix. Dave stood there, holding the door open for her, stiff and silent. She'd been walking clockwise around the chair, and slowed her steps at the sound, then walked forward to slip past him through the door.

The main floor of the house was as deserted now as it had been when Dave had brought her down, and by her reckoning several hours had passed while she'd been confined. LaCroix's brief visit couldn't have taken place more than half an hour ago, though. The house was still and dimly lit, and Natalie was certain she imagined the heavy, ominous feel in the air.

Dave led her across the floor to the very room in which she and Janette had talked to Sarah earlier. This time they moved deeper into the suite, past the ornate sitting room and into a larger room. More couches and chairs, all plush and expensive looking, but whereas the sitting room had a decidedly feminine feel Natalie was certain a man had decorated and occupied this room.

Moot point, really, she thought as she took in the figures that already occupied the room as she was led into it. No faces she recognized.

A very bad sign.

She fervently hoped they were all right, all still alive. She didn't need any more

deaths or injuries on her head.

But there were three men in the room, and Natalie surmised that they must be Enforcers. They looked like your typical, garden variety vampires, the kind of creature you'd expect to see, straight from the b-movies. Gaunt, sunken eyes and deathly pallor, their faces were hard and cruel. All were dressed in expensive black suits. Natalie wondered how on earth they managed to move among mortals since they looked so strange and fearsome. Then again, perhaps they didn't.

Two of them rose as she was ushered in. The third continued to sit casually in his chair, his legs crossed and his hands folded neatly in his lap. Two of them took up position on either side of her. She heard Dave beat a hasty retreat out the door once she was inside.

The room was silent for several moments, and Natalie wondered briefly if they were waiting for her to say something. Unable to stand it any longer, she cleared her throat and looked to the third Enforcers who seemed to be the leader expectantly. This situation was way out of her depth and she didn't have the faintest idea of what to say, how to begin.

For his part, he merely looked back at her without saying a word. Natalie was certain she'd never seen anything as cold and dead as those eyes as they drilled through her. Even LaCroix, about whom she'd heard some horror stories, had a depth and range of emotion which he managed to convey as he looked at you. Sometimes that message wasn't particularly pleasant, but it was apparent nonetheless.

Not so, this one. She couldn't read these eyes at all. Or either of the other two she realized, glancing first to her right, then to her left. But that ceased to matter when she saw what the two on either side of her were clutching prominently in front of them.

Wooden stakes.

The mere sight of them stopped all thought, all strategy. Instead, it conjured up memories and sensations from last night. Natalie began to tremble violently and whirled to back away from them as they seemed to close in on her, only to be stopped dead in her tracks by a loud hiss from the one seated in the chair behind her. When she twisted around to look at him his expression indicated that he was vastly amused by her fear. His pale lips were drawn up into a thin, ghastly smile.

Wordlessly he rose and slipped past her, taking the stake from the hands of the one nearest to her. Natalie had never realized that vampires were capable of the normal flight-or-flight sympathetic responses to which mortals succumbed. But the instinct was clanging loud and strong inside her: her mouth was dry, and a thin film of fear sweat broke out across her entire body.

As they closed in on her she backed away from them nervously, only to realize too late that they were maneuvering her into the corner furthest from the door and freedom. Were they going to just stake her without asking her any questions?

"Stop!" she managed to gasp out as they stood two or three feet from her, the one holding the stake closest to her.

That stopped them, though Natalie was sure it was due to the fact that she'd managed to find nerve enough to ask anything at all rather than her specific command. All she cared about was that they'd stopped slowly pressing forward. She was still trapped; there was no way she would possibly slip past him, though it occurred to her to try.

The leader lifted the tip of the wooden stake and placing the tip against her shoulder, just where the one last night had gone through her. The feel of it against her, even through her clothes made her knees turn to jelly and to her horror she felt herself start to slide weakly down the wall toward the floor. She couldn't go through that again, she thought frantically, her hand reaching up to wrap around the piece of wood. The Enforcers held it firmly against her, and she heard one of them laugh.

"We could pin her to the wall with it," one of them said.

The tip pressed against her more firmly. "Stand up," the one holding the piece of wood commanded. His amused smile turned into a grin. Natalie wanted to beg him to let her go, to plead with him to remove the stake. Actively, she fought down the urge. It might come to that, but not just now. She wouldn't beg now.

"Stand up," he repeated. Natalie couldn't stop shaking, but she forced her muscles into action, willed her knees to lock rigidly so that she could stand up, though she leaned tightly against the wall. She was so afraid; the stake was pressed tightly against her flesh, the three vampires were gathered too closely around her.

When he abruptly pulled the stake away from her, she nearly fell to the floor again. But she was grateful beyond words to him for having done so. It was as if the hand that had been throttling her, cutting off her air had suddenly been removed, giving her the freedom to draw deep, desperate breaths.

He gazed intently at her for several seconds, then with a small laugh turned and resumed his seat, gesturing with the stake that he still held in his hand for her to stand directly in front of him. When she didn't move immediately, one of them grabbed her arm roughly and jerked her out into the center of the room to stand in the spot the leader had indicated.

"Where is Nicholas deBrabant?" he asked without preamble.

Natalie blinked at him for a moment. "I don't know," she answered truthfully, and was relieved to see him nod in agreement. It occurred to her that she might test out the theory that they could detect lies, but any willful belligerence she might have been capable of died at the sight of those stakes and the brief threatening posture of the Enforcers as they gathered around her. She could well understand why they had the reputation they did, realizing that they found and exploited the weaknesses of the vampires they were sent to question. There had been no doubt in her mind, for several long and uncomfortable moments there that they would rather have killed her and been done with it. Had she not gone through the ordeal she'd endured the night before, she might have provoked them into it, then welcomed it once it finally happened. It was yet another awful irony that that avenue of escape, or so it had come to be termed in her mind, had been cut off.

"Does he know that you are a member of the Community now?" The disgust was plain in his voice.

Natalie shook her head. "I don't know. I haven't seen him since..." She paused, unable to continue. She hadn't seen him since that awful night when she'd provoked him into biting her. She'd been so sure of him; in the end, however, she'd been so wrong. "I don't know," she repeated sadly. "I don't think so."

Again he nodded. "Tell me about your brother, Richard Lambert."

Taken aback for a moment by the question, Natalie could only stare at him. "What about him?" she finally managed to ask.

"Who brought him across and what happened as a result of that."

Natalie looked down quickly. This was unexpected. Were they going to hold her accountable for that as well? "He was shot trying to help out with a hostage situation," she began, choosing her words carefully. "The doctors told me there was nothing to be done for him and that he wouldn't live. So I asked Nick to do it." That was untrue, and unfair and she quickly looked up and amended her last statement. "I forced Nick to do it. He didn't want to, but he did it for me. I told him he owed it to me."

"So Nicholas brought Richard across," he said. "Then what?"

"We substituted his body with the body of a homeless man and took Richard to Nick's loft. He was still unconscious. When he woke up, Nick made me leave." She wasn't about to mention that she and Nick had told Richard's wife everything, and that she had been there at the time as well. No need to drag her into this, particularly since Natalie was fairly certain she didn't remember anything about it.

"Did you see your brother again?"

Natalie closed her eyes, remembering Richard's face, twisted and distorted with the realization of his newfound power. Richard, the good man, the white knight, turned into a murderer and reveling in it. What had she done? No wonder Nick had refused to bring her across when she'd asked. If it happened to Richard there was a good chance it would happen to her as well.

"Did you see your brother again?" The question, repeated in more insistent tones, intruded on her painful memories, and she nodded, eyes still closed.

"Describe him to me."

Opening her eyes at this, Natalie slowly shook her head back and forth in denial. "You must know," she began.

He shifted in his seat, leaning forward. "I do," he said, his cold eyes looking directly into hers. "But I want to hear your version of it."

She shivered, both at the memories and at his expression. "He was mad," she said, each word wrung painfully from her lips.

"In what way," he prompted.

"He killed all those people," she said, closing her eyes again. She could still see them. They haunted her, she realized, since she saw their faces often, in her dreams, in idle moments in the office. "And he wanted to kill more. He didn't regret what he'd done."

"Is it true that Nicholas left your brother alone?"

"What?" Natalie asked, frowning.

He rose, tapping the stake gently in his hand. "Nicholas didn't remain to watch over your brother?"

It dawned on her then. That's what this was all about. Between her and Richard they were building a good case against Nick. There must be some kind of rule, albeit a sensible rule, that mandated that new vampires had to be supervised lest they run wild. She'd certainly experienced the consequences of that in the last couple of days.

"Now you see," he said, resuming his seat and looking intently at her again. Had he read her mind?

There was nothing she could say in Nick's defense, she realized. It had occurred to her to that Nick should never have left Richard alone, that if Nick had only booked off of work for a few more days, fed him something other than cow blood, all that

bloodshed might have been prevented. But she'd been in too much pain to lash out at Nick at that time. She'd just lost her brother twice, and she'd also played a substantial role in it happening the second time. It was an incident that neither she nor Nick ever talked about afterwards, though they'd both desperately needed to.

"I'm as much to blame as he is," she attempted. That much was true.

The Enforcers sitting before her nodded in agreement. "But once it was done, the responsibility was Nicholas' and Nicholas' alone. *You* are his responsibility as well."

I sense a pattern here, some voice in her mind that had once probably belonged to Schanke intoned flippantly. There was a pattern, a pattern of responsibility and Nick not taking it she realized. For a while there they'd actually begun to make progress. Until LaCroix had returned, and Nick had begun to slip away from her.

His eyes lifted away from her, to a point somewhere over her shoulder, and Natalie felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle uncomfortably. Someone else had entered the room and was standing behind her. "Are you going to intervene on his behalf again this time?" he asked as Natalie turned her head. LaCroix stood there, flanked by Janette. Sarah stood just behind them, leaning against the doorway, her expression wary. The Enforcer's tone was sarcastic and full of contempt as he addressed LaCroix.

"I am," he said softly.

The Enforcer slowly shook his head. "I think not, Lucien," he said. Natalie watched as LaCroix made a visible effort not to bristle at the use of his given name.

"I've come to fetch Doctor Lambert," LaCroix said.

"Doctor Lambert is coming with us," he countered calmly. "Since Nicholas has once again failed to live up to his responsibility, we will look after her training. The Community can make use of her...abilities."

Natalie did not like the sound of that, and neither, she could tell, did LaCroix as he snorted contemptuously. Without meaning to she looked to LaCroix and Janette for reassurance. LaCroix's gaze flicked over her quickly. Janette merely nodded slightly, reassuringly.

"I will assume responsibility for Doctor Lambert," LaCroix said evenly.

At this the Enforcer laughed. "And why isn't Nicholas here to claim her?"

LaCroix blinked. "Nicholas is none of your concern."

"Ah, but he is." Natalie felt the stance of the two Enforcers standing near her stiffen, though she'd seen no sign from the leader. The tension in the room was again very thick as LaCroix and the Enforcer confronted one another. She didn't want to go with the Enforcers, of that she was absolutely certain. And it seemed to her that if LaCroix was afraid of the Enforcers he was doing a great job of not showing it. Natalie found herself in the unusual position of actually hoping LaCroix would win this time.

The leader continued. "Where is Nicholas?"

She dared another glance toward LaCroix and Janette and saw that she was also looking warily at LaCroix. "I will see that he is punished for this. I give you my word."

"Not good enough," the Enforcer said. "Not this time. Nicholas has become a liability. To the Community. And so, for that matter, have you, since you've indulged his flagrant disregard for the Code.. And broken it yourself, in your games with him. It's time it was ended." As he spoke he tightened his grip on the wooden stake in his hand and lifted it slightly, his meaning clear.

LaCroix seemed to ponder this, and Natalie involuntarily shifted her position, tensed. Maybe she could make it to the door, create some kind of diversion. "I see," she heard LaCroix say quietly.

Now.

She started to move just as she felt an arm snake around her waist. In shock, she looked up into the face of the Enforcer who had been standing off to her left. He pulled her roughly back against him, squeezing so hard that she thought her ribs might break.

LaCroix stood in front of the leader as still as a statue. "As I said, Doctor Lambert will remain with us. We will oversee her integration into the Community. Several of my associates will remain behind to...persuade you to tell us where Nicholas is." Then, with a nasty smile, he added. "So that we can be finished with this business, once and for all."

As he turned and motioned to the one holding her, Natalie saw him exchange a quick glance with Sarah. Signed, sealed and delivered, Natalie thought bitterly, and suddenly it all clicked into place. Nick was as much a means to an end as she was. Sarah, the Enforcers, they were after LaCroix! Involuntarily she began to struggle against the Enforcer who held her. She didn't like being so close to him, didn't like being pinned against her will. In response, he tightened his grip almost painfully, digging his fingers into her side. Had she been mortal she'd be dead. As it was she was incredibly uncomfortable.

The head Enforcer was speaking again. He motioned to the one holding her. "Take her out to the car." Then he addressed her. "This really is for the best, Doctor Lambert. Trust me."

"No!" she said shaking her head. The words were leaving her lips, and had she not been so terrified, she would have been ashamed. "Don't let them take me," she implored, looking over to Janette. God, she sounded pathetic, but she didn't know what else to do as the one holding her started to move, dragging her from the room with him.

She saw Janette reach out to touch LaCroix, and took hope from the look on her face. LaCroix had come to fetch her. He needed her for some reason. For Nick.

There wasn't any chance to determine further what Janette and LaCroix might be planning because in a blur of motion, LaCroix seized the Enforcer standing closest to him, and threw him brutally into a nearby wall. Plaster rained down from minute cracks where he hit. Then, before he had time to recover, LaCroix seized him again, and threw him just as roughly into the leader, sending the two vampires slamming into the opposite wall. This was followed by the sound of breaking glass, as LaCroix reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle of alcohol which he threw on the floor in front of him. The leader renewed his struggles to break free, obviously realizing what LaCroix intended.

But it was too late. LaCroix almost casually lit a match and tossed it onto the wet stain on the floor, not even bothering to watch as the alcohol was consumed by flames.

One of the Enforcers caught fire. Just his arm at first, the flames leaping high, but it spread over his body with incredible speed. As the people in the room looked on in shock, he began screaming. The sound made Natalie reflexively cease struggling to clap her hands over her ears. She'd heard that sound before, once a long time ago when she'd been a little girl. The sound of someone being burned to death.

The Enforcer holding her relaxed his grip just slightly, but she was simply too

stunned and horrified to even think about pulling free. LaCroix, however, was more than prepared He skirted the burning vampire, who had staggered to his feet only to collapse into a pile of flesh and cloth on the couch, setting it ablaze. LaCroix snatched up a fallen wooden stake.

In seconds the one holding her was impaled to the wall, blood gurgling out of his mouth from the stake that pierced his chest, right through his heart. He was already turning gray and wasting away. He would be dead in seconds.

"Janette, run!" LaCroix ordered over his shoulder as he reached forward to snatch her wrist. His fingers around her arm hurt, but she didn't have time to complain as he wrenched her arm and pulled her after him toward the room.

There was still one more Enforcer in the room, and he moved swiftly once he rose from the floor. With a snarl he leapt after them and seized LaCroix viciously by the shoulder, dragging the two of them back into the center of the room near the remains of the burning vampire. Too late, she turned and saw the wooden stake still in the Enforcer's hands arc toward LaCroix's back and neck. The angle wouldn't kill him, but it would certainly incapacitate him. She shouted out something strangled and inarticulate, but LaCroix had already anticipated this move and managed to turn in time to get his arm up to deflect the blow.

And then, out of nowhere, a dark blur slammed into them which such force it sent the three of them flying. Natalie landed hard on her shoulder and bit her lip at the sharp, brief pain. When she rolled over and looked up, Jose and the Enforcer were on the floor grappling roughly for the wooden stake. Scrambling to her feet she was about to move forward to help him when LaCroix was suddenly between her and the two struggling vampires. Without a moment of hesitation, he turned the burning sofa over onto the two of them.

"No! Jose!" she managed to choke out as she saw the flames renew themselves with the new fuel. "No!" Rapidly her eyes scanned the room, searching for something that would smother the flames, while fighting her own horror. She wouldn't stand helplessly aside as this happened again. But there was only heavy furniture; no rugs. There must be a fire extinguisher somewhere in the building she thought frantically, heading for the door, trying not to gag as the smell of burning flesh filled the air once again.

But LaCroix was blocking her way, grasping her wrist again. "Leave him!" he shouted coldly.

But she couldn't. She *wouldn't*. The fingers of her free hand tore at his as he again began pulling her after him. She kicked at his legs, and pounded on his back with the heel of her hand as he dragged her along after him, screaming at him to stop and let her go.

LaCroix ignored her until she landed a good solid blow to the back of his neck then started clawing at his face from behind. She hadn't hurt him, but she'd definitely annoyed him. He drew her up beside him then shoved her roughly against the nearest wall. She watched in detached fascination as his fist drew back, knowing exactly what was coming as it connected solidly with her jaw.

For what seemed like a long time she was only aware of the world spinning crazily around her in a whirl of brightly colored patches and strange, incoherent noises. Gradually, she realized she was hanging upside down. He's carrying me over his

shoulder, she thought numbly. Then her stomach nearly heaved as she realized they were no longer on the ground. LaCroix was flying above Toronto with her and she was certain she was going to be sick.

She dug her fingers into the leather of his coat to signal him that she was awake and to gain a more secure purchase despite the firm grip he had around her waist. He ignored her and continued flying. Out of the corner of her eye, however, as she lifted her head, she saw another dark shape that she thought might be Janette. And just beyond that was the Toronto skyline.

Tinged with just the barest traces of pink.

The sun! She scrabbled frantically at Lacroix's coat again. "The sun!" she shouted. What was he doing? They had to find shelter soon! All her senses were screaming just that to her. Oblivious to the warning tightening of his grip she began kicking and struggling with enough force that she felt them dip suddenly and uncontrollably down toward the earth.

He was shouting something. Hopefully it was directions to Janette to follow but she somehow suspected they were an unflattering string of adjectives describing her. She didn't care. The earth was rushing up to meet them so quickly she had to close her eyes, clinging tightly to him and expecting to slam into the street at any second.

But they didn't. They landed firmly, and before she had a chance to open her eyes LaCroix unceremoniously shoved her off his shoulder onto the pavement like a sack of potatoes. She didn't have time to get her bearings before she heard him snarl. "Get up!" he spat at her, then she felt his cold hand in her hair, hauling her roughly to her feet. With a snarl of her own she reached up and seized his wrist as he dragged her over to where Janette was just pulling open the back door of a Chinese restaurant. Natalie was getting pretty sick and tired of people pulling her hair but LaCroix refused to let go until they were inside and the door firmly back in place.

He heaved her against the counter. "Wait here. Get something to cover yourselves with," he instructed Janette. "Be ready to go when I get back."

And with that he was gone, leaving Natalie to stare questioningly at Janette as she leaned panting against the stainless steel counter.

Janette didn't speak, but simply moved past her, heading for the main dining room. Numbly Natalie followed. "We have to go back for Jose," she said after a few minutes, as she watched Janette pull the tablecloths off of several pre-set tables.

"We can't," Janette said, shaking her head and handing her several of the clothes. "These will have to do," she said.

"We can't just leave him behind," Natalie insisted.

"We already have," Janette said, turning to fix her with a determined stare. "Natalie, he saved your life twice. Don't throw that gift away by going back there." She paused, and leaned shakily against a nearby table. "We can never go back there," she said wearily.

Natalie was about to argue further with her, but was struck by a sudden sense of fragility in the other woman, as if she would turn to dust at the slightest breeze. "They made you tell them," she said instead.

Surprisingly, Janette shook her head. "No," she said. "They asked me a lot of questions about Nicholas." She swallowed. "But they suspected...something. They knew something was not quite right about me, that something had changed. They were

going to take me with them. No doubt to conduct a proper interview," she said bitterly. "But I didn't tell them."

Natalie breathed a small sigh of relief over the fact that Janette's secret was at least partially safe. But there was still Jose to worry about. "Surely most of them will be out looking for us. They won't expect us to go back," she protested. "Janette, I can't just leave him there."

"Natalie, he's probably dead," Janette said gently.

"Don't say that!"

"We burn very quickly."

Natalie closed her eyes and swallowed, but when she did so, all she was saw Jose, lying on the floor, flames licking at his clothing, his body. But he hadn't made a sound; no screams. Nothing. He could still be alive.

"Then I'll stay behind, and go back tonight," she ventured, licking her lips and opening her eyes. The images where terrible, and she couldn't bear the thought of him burning to death.

Janette sighed in exasperation. "You think you can spend the whole day here by yourself," she said irritably. "With cooks, and busboys, and waitresses and customers. All that blood just--"

"Stop it!" Natalie shouted, clapping her hands over her ears.

"LaCroix will not allow you to stay," she said.

Natalie lowered her arms. "He's *not* my master!" she said sharply.

Janette seemed to consider this for several moments. "True, he's not," she said finally. "But he's older, and stronger. And if you give him trouble he won't hesitate to hurt you. Badly."

From the bitterness in Janette's voice, Natalie realized she was speaking from experience.

Before they could continue their conversation, there was a commotion in the back. The two women rushed from the dining room into the kitchen to find LaCroix standing in the darkened vestibule, tendrils of smoke rising from his exposed skin.

He seemed oblivious to the pain, if he even, indeed, felt any, as he strode forward. "I have a truck and a driver," he said curtly. "The sun is up. We must get to Nicholas as quickly as possible. Janette, can you walk in the sun long enough to get to the truck?"

Janette looked dubious for a moment. "I'm not sure," she said after several seconds. "I am not quite a fledgling, but..."

LaCroix nodded. "Then I'll help you," he said, as he began wrapping Janette in the tablecloths, taking care to cover any exposed skin. "Do the same," he said to Natalie over his shoulder as he wrapped his arm securely around Janette's shoulders and began guiding her toward the doorway.

Almost too late Natalie realized he was going to open the door and darted quickly into the safety of the dining room. For a moment she debated whether or not to follow LaCroix's orders. But only for a moment as she realized she'd never make her way back to Sarah's alone, let alone infiltrate it to find Jose. Momentarily defeated, she began wrapping the remaining tablecloths around her shoulders and head, and when she heard the door open again and LaCroix return she slipped back into the kitchen.

He didn't bother addressing her. He simply reached forward and pulled the cloth

down over her face. However, instead of guiding her out as he had Janette, he simply picked her up and draped her over his shoulder again. Natalie squawked at that, and was about to protest when she felt them move toward the door. This time, however, LaCroix had wisely pinned her arms to her sides with his so she couldn't use them. Her feet were hampered by the tablecloths as well.

Despite that, Natalie felt herself struggling and screaming as they drew closer to the door. Any second now and it would open and they would be outside. She tried not to react, but the terror was unbearable and she simply couldn't will it away.

The sun! She could feel it burning its way through the thin cloth that protected her and she renewed her struggles. Thankfully, though, LaCroix had obviously parked the truck close to the entrance, and Natalie felt herself once again heaved off his shoulder, but this time onto a cold metal surface. As she disentangled herself from the tablecloths she heard the door to the truck slam shut behind her.

"A frozen foods truck?" Janette said, and the disdain in her voice was evident.

"It will have to do. She struggled too much and prevented me from reaching the car I'd arranged. Blame her." LaCroix countered with a cold glance in her direction as he walked forward. "Drive!" he called out, slapping the wall. At once the truck lurched forward and they began moving. "Nicholas needs you," he spat at her, "But make no mistake, Doctor Lambert. If it were up to me I'd push you out into the sun for what you've done! Or bury you and let you go mad. That would be a fitting punishment for you. And I still might just do it!"

"You bastard!" Natalie hissed, ignoring his obvious threat as she tried to rise to her feet. But the swaying of the truck made that difficult and she decided to remain seated rather than risk the indignity of falling flat on her face in front of him. Somehow, facing up to LaCroix wasn't nearly as difficult in light of the other horrors of the past few days. At least he was something familiar, and he was behaving exactly as she expected him to. And aside from being tired of being pushed around she realized she had a slight advantage. He'd just admitted he needed her. Nevermind that she needed him too. And Janette. There was no escaping that fact either.

"The gypsy?" he sneered, amused at her distress over the matter.

"Yes."

"It was necessary. And he was a fool. But at least he bought us some time." He glanced over at Janette. "Thanks to him, we were able to make our escape." Then he turned to glare at her once more. "No thanks to you!"

"Enough!" Janette interjected before Natalie could protest. "I refuse to be trapped here all day listening to the two of you bicker. We've far more important things to worry about." She stopped abruptly, then continued in a softer voice. "How is Nicholas?" Janette asked.

A weariness seemed to settle grimly over LaCroix as he held Janette's gaze, and Natalie had the good sense to hold her tongue. For the briefest of moments she felt a wave of empathy for LaCroix, recognizing this as a rare moment of vulnerability. "Nicholas...is not himself," he said after several long moments. "I...cannot reach him now...at all. I've left him in the care of an old friend. Someone I can trust." Then he sighed. "At least until she hears of this, that is." A stillness seemed to settle over the group, and Natalie could feel Janette's unease. As if sensing it as well, LaCroix glanced over in her direction. "Yes," he said with a small nod. "They'll hunt all of us down for

this," he said. "There were too many witnesses. They'll have to, simply to save face as much as anything else."

"The driver?" Janette asked, inclining her head toward the front of the truck.

"He was unfortunate to cross my path this morning. I 'convinced' him that he wanted to spend the day driving. We'll have to share him once it gets dark. There'll be no time to hunt. We must get to Nicholas."

His words sank in; he was talking about hunting. About killing. The nonchalant manner in which he spoke made her sick. She wasn't going to hunt, not if she could help it. And she saw that Janette didn't look particularly comfortable with it either, though she seemed resigned to it, and fairly quickly.

"They were after you," Natalie said, attempting to get off this horrifying subject.

LaCroix merely nodded. "The fools. Others have tried. And failed."

Natalie saw Janette frown at that, then glance thoughtfully over at her. Suddenly, Natalie knew what was going through the other woman's mind; there was more to this than met the eye. Could they have been after LaCroix simply because an opportunity presented itself? Did they have another prize in mind?

Then LaCroix shot another angry glance in her direction before shaking his head sadly. "The things I do for you, Nicholas. The things I do for you."

Natalie leaned back and closed her eyes. The things I do, indeed, a voice inside her echoed LaCroix. She wanted to press LaCroix, pry more details about Nick's condition from him. And find out what Janette was thinking. But she realized there would be time for that later. At the moment, there were other matters to consider; plans to make for eluding the Enforcers, plans to make for survival. The last part made her shiver.

Survival meant blood.

And somewhere, somehow, in the midst of all that Natalie realized there would be Nick to deal with as well.

If she hadn't been sure of it before, Natalie was utterly convinced by now that *nothing* was ever easy.

The End?

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